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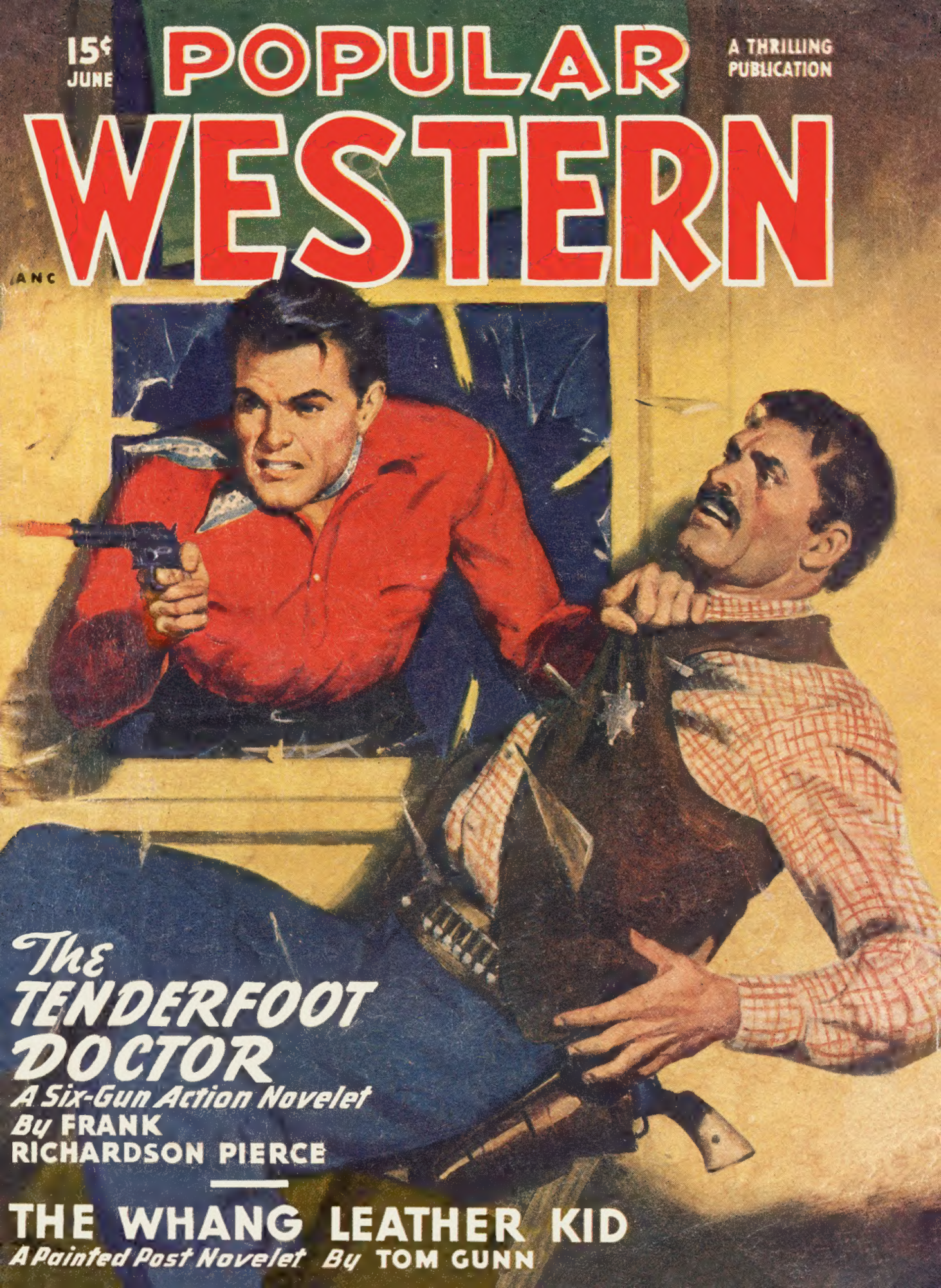

The TENDERFOOT DOCTOR

A Six-Gun Action Novelet

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

THE WHANG LEATHER KID

A Painted Post Novelet By TOM GUNN

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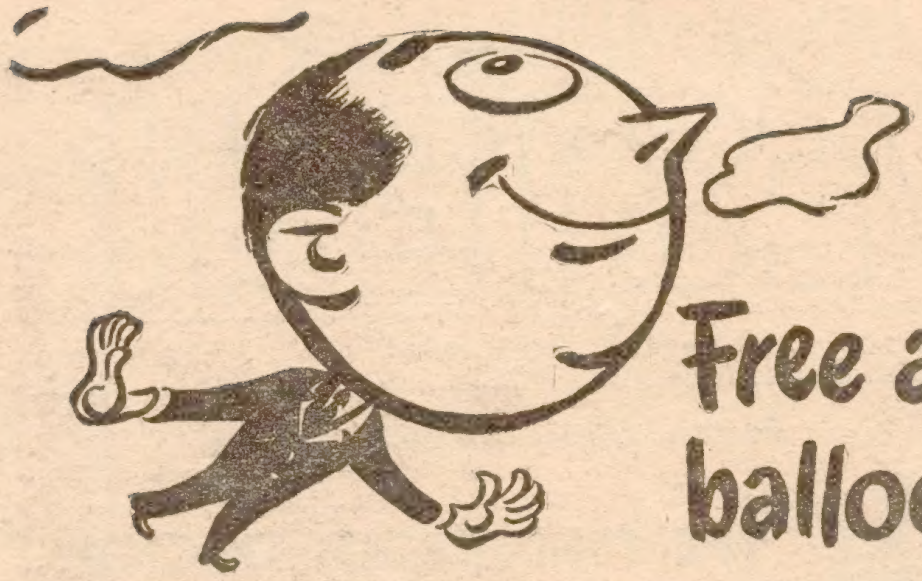

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POPULAR WESTERN

Vol. XXXVI, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION June, 1949

Featured Action Novelet

THE TENDERFOOT DOCTOR

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

When Lava City has a bad case of lawlessness, Doc Burke compounds his own powdersmoke prescription, and it proves to be strong medicine for outlaws! 9

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The HOME CORRAL

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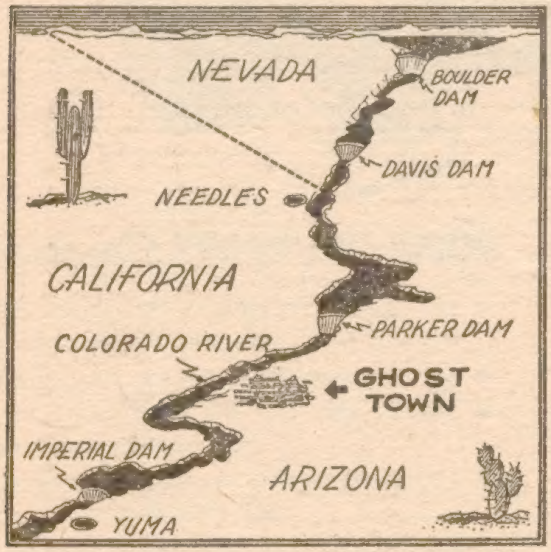
DOC LONG TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Since our last get-together, I've made pasear to one of my favorite stamping grounds, down yonderly on the Mojave Desert. I've pitched camp beside the mighty lower Colorado River. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, I've stumbled onto the strangest "ghost town" out West.

Ghost town, did I say? Right now, Poston is the liveliest ghost town I've ever seen in meandering the outlands.

In order to explain that, let's turn back eight eventful years—back to the world-



shattering event at Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941.

At that time, at the outbreak of our Pacific War, all along our menaced, vulnerable West Coast there lived many thousands of Japanese, both alien and American-born, loyal and disloyal. Around and among them, war's hatred and fears flamed high, overnight. So, for their own protection, as well as to safeguard our national security, these confused, divided people were hustled from their homes by the Army and concentrated in quick-built camps, far away from our seaports, oilfields and industrial centers.

A Mass Migration

It was one of the great mass migrations of history. As it turned out, when the war hysteria died down, it was an injustice and hardship on some loyal Japanese-Americans. But nobody denies the efficiency of the job. It was accomplished in miraculously short time, and almost without any "incident" of hostility or violence.

There were ten camps, called "relocation centers," extending back as far as Arkansas. The largest one leaped into existence in a mesquite wilderness, on the Arizona side of the Colorado River, about halfway between Needles and Yuma.

This camp was named Poston, after a noted pioneer. The lonely desert plain had, since time immemorial, always been a land of few people. It was the Mojave Indian Reservation, where about 1000 tribesmen lived in an area 40 miles long, 10 miles across. But in a few busy weeks, Poston became the home of 18,000 war-banished Japanese, plus a few hundred hard-driven government administrators.

Shelter was the first need. So barracks were built—long, shedlike buildings, each housing four family units. Miles of barracks grew, row upon row, along hastily laid out streets, and with them community buildings such as wash-and-bath houses, schools, hospitals, warehouses and places of worship, also water and sewer systems.

Paved Highway

The interned Japanese pitched in and shared the work. Soon a paved highway linked Poston with the small desert town of

Parker, about 15 miles north, where supplies arrived by trainloads.

Poston, at this stage, would have pained even the hardened frontier eye of the man whose name it bore, Colonel Charles D. Poston, first Indian Superintendent of Arizona Territory, in 1864. For Poston was a bleak and ugly checkerboard of barracks covered with black roofing paper, double-roofed for protection from the scorching Arizona sun. The thermometer often hit 120 degrees in summer. Every activity was choked in dense dust that rose from the powdery silt. Thus Poston sprawled on the sweltering plain, a city apart from all the rest of the world, with a barrier of miles and bitterness separating these sad, evacuated people from all they cherished in the past.

Nor did they know what the future held. Through the West, excited demands rose that they all be shipped back to Japan, come the war's end. That too, was uncertain. For the outcome of the war was mighty hard to predict in those dark, early days of American defeat and retreat in the far Pacific.

Trees and Gardens

The Japanese accepted their exile in good spirit, for the most part, were industrious and adaptable, and among them were men of the soil—gardeners and farmers. So they quickly seized advantage of a bountiful flow of water brought from the river in a large irrigation canal.

Trees were planted to shade the gloomy barracks, shrubs set out to screen them from the blistering desert sandstorms. Vegetable gardens pushed back the mesquite. The camp's garbage dump became a hog farm. Then alfalfa fields, cows, milk for the 5000 schoolchildren. Not nearly enough Caucasian teachers to go around. So volunteer Japanese teachers were drawn from the college-trained.

Gradually, painfully, the aspect of Poston changed, and with that change came a social order such as any hard-born pioneer community creates in any time or place.

The Japanese nature seemed to crave rustic beauty. So, as shade trees flourished and gardens grew, the people graced their premises with rock gardens, with thatch pagodas woven with desert willow instead of bamboo, and the widening of ditches into

(Continued on page 90)

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EXACTLY! AND TONIGHT THE GANG AT THIS END WILL TRY TO NAB IT. MAY I USE YOUR 'PHONE?

THAT'S THAT. WELL, YOU FOLKS HAVE YOUR DINNER. I'LL BE BACK ABOUT NIGHTFALL
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SURE. COME UPSTAIRS AND FRESHEN UP

THIS BLADE SURE MAKES SHORT WORK OF WHISKERS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!
I'M SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING

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a novelet by **FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE**

Doc, shooting as he advanced, saw the killer lust in Buck Brawley's eyes replaced by terror

The TENDERFOOT DOCTOR

When Lava City has a bad case of lawlessness, Doc Burke compounds his own powdersmoke prescription!

CHAPTER I

Train Holdup

YOUNG Doc Burke's heart was pounding rapidly, and he frowned and diagnosed his condition. It was simple enough. He was seeing the West for the first time, and something within him was accepting the challenge. His heart was pounding with excitement. Calmness, of course, would return after he had seen a little more of the country.

Within the past five minutes, sitting in the smoker of the Overland train, he had made his decision. Somewhere in the West he would hang up his shingle and wait for his first patient.

A Medico From the East Proves to Be Strong

He hoped it wouldn't be long, and he also hoped surgery might be involved. Had he known the West better young Doc Burke would have realized that the odds in favor of his wishes coming true were good. Most any gambler would have bet Doc Burke a hundred dollars against five. And the gambler wouldn't have worried much about winning, either.

Up in the baggage car a brand-new trunk contained the instruments that any young doctor needed. His little black bag rode in the sleeping car in the space assigned to him. In it also were sundry pills, pain killers, surgical instruments and what not. Children would be solemnly told that Doc Burke "brought babies" in the little black bag.

Besides several years in college, Doc had also put in time in an Eastern hospital. To give potential patients confidence he had grown a furious beard, blacker than a villain's heart and probably full of germs. But Doc knew little of germs, it being a period when oil lamps lighted the passenger cars. The cars were made of wood, which splintered readily when there were wrecks. The lighted oil lamps did the rest.

Doc was smoking a cigar and thinking of the horror of railroad wrecks when the train jolted to a stop.

"What're we stopping here for?" he asked. He opened a window and started to poke out his head for a better look.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," his seat-mate advised. "It might be a holdup. And if it is, the road agents discourage such things by shootin' along the cars!"

The man pulled a huge diamond ring off his finger and put it on the floor. He opened his draw-string purse, removed ten twenty dollar gold pieces, dropped them on the floor and covered them with orange peelings and egg shells which had been left when a previous occupant had eaten a lunch.

"It's best to leave a little money for the robbers," the man said. "If they find nothin' on a man they know he's cached some of his money. Findin' nothing, after all the risk he's taken, makes a robber mighty annoyed—mighty annoyed."

A REVOLVER cracked, then a rifle let go and a bullet droned past the window.

"Forty-five seventy," Doc's seat-mate observed. "Pretty heavy lead those cusses are packin'. Chances are it's the Lava Hill outfit."

"Lava Hill?" Doc queried.

"Yeah," the other man answered. "They got a hideout in the back country. Millions of years ago, or anyway, thousands, there were plenty volcanoes in these parts."

With narrowed eyes he was watching the door. He had his hands ready to lift on the slightest order. Doc wondered why the men in the car were not taking measures of defense.

"Well," the man beside him went on, "if yuh can imagine plowed ground with furrows five hundred feet deep, yuh can get an idea of what the back country is like. Best place in the world for a robber's roost."

"What do they live on?"

"Oh it ain't all lava. Where there's soil, it's rich and red. Grass, vegetables, fruit, wild flowers and pine trees grow fine. Yuh'll find big stretches of good country, even small lakes alive with trout, and then suddenly—lava, where nothin' grows. Buck Brawley and his outfit have used the Lava Hill country of late from what I hear."

"Why aren't we getting down behind the seats and preparing to blast them into the middle of next week when they come through the door?" Doc Burke asked.

"You'll find out," his companion replied. "You haven't been in the West long enough to get onto the tricks."

"Here comes a lady," Doc said.

"I've been expectin' her," the man said softly.

The woman was as white as the proverbial sheet. She held a grain sack in her hands and was followed by a masked man carrying a pair of six-guns.

"Buck Brawley," Doc Burke's seat-mate said. "Or his brother Ed."

"How do you know?" Doc asked. "He's masked."

"Hat covered with lava dust for one

thing," the Westerner said. "Look at his hands. Did yuh ever see bigger, or steadier hands?"

As a student and intern, Doc Burke's experience was not broad, but he had never seen bigger hands. A professional light filled his eyes.

"Now boys," the train robber, Brawley, was saying, "remember yuh're gentlemen and there's a lady in our midst. Kindly shell out. First hold up yore money and rings. I know some of yuh will try to

DOC BURKE

hold out, but that's dangerous. If I find a man has held out on me, or if I *think* a man's holdin' out, I'll kill him deader'n a mackerel. Hurry, and don't keep the lady waitin'. . . Lady, make shore there ain't any money on the floor."

Shaking fingers exhibited rings and gold pieces, then dropped them into the bag. As one man hesitated, the hammer fell and a bullet whined over the passengers' heads too close for comfort, and buried itself in wood at the end of the train. Acrid fumes mixed with tobacco smoke, and several started sneezing. At regular intervals the rifles outside sent bullets whining along the windows.

"I don't think much of this business of tamely submitting to a holdup," Doc Burke grumbled.

"If yuh expect to become a famous Western doctor," his seat-mate suggested, "yuh'll better use yore head instead of fists or six-guns."

"That's pretty hard to remember when your instincts are to cut loose with knuckles of lead," Doc said.

"Don't forget this," the man warned. "Out here gun-fighters, sheriffs, marshals, punchers, miners and teamsters, to name a few, are plentiful. And if we don't have one handy we can make one out of the average man in a while, but doctors are few and far between. And yuh can't make one in a few days or months. Never forget that yore duty to humanity comes first. Don't let things—anything—happen to yuh. Somebody might die because yuh smashed yore fist on a hard head. They might die because yuh couldn't operate with a broken hand."

"I hadn't thought of that," Doc Burke admitted. "I'm young."

"Young and hot-headed," the man said. "What are yore plans?"

"A fine time to ask me," Doc answered. Then suddenly he realized his seat-mate was using this method of calming him down. "Until I've practice enough for my modest wants, I'll run a drug store in connection with my practice. Later, a little hospital. . . Well, the lady's here."

HE HAD removed most of the gold from his purse and as he prepared to drop the purse into the bag, the Lava Hill outlaw bellowed:

"You two! Open yore purses and let me see what falls into the bag. If it ain't enough—well, yuh still have time to dig."

"I'm Barney Lee," Doc's seat-mate said, "and yuh know me, so I won't try to fool yuh."

"Where's yore ring, Barney Lee?"

"Since you fellows are on the loose," Barney retorted, "a wise man leaves his valuables at home."

"Search the young squirt hiding behind the whiskers," the outlaw ordered.

"He's a young doctor just hangin' out

his shingle," Barney Lee said. "And he's dead broke."

"Pass him up, lady," the outlaw said.

When she had completed her collection he made her bring the bag to him.

"Come here, Doc, I want to talk to yuh," the outlaw said.

Doc Burke climbed over Barney Lee's legs. Outside purple shadows were filling the draws. The bleak, treeless mountain in the distance he supposed was Lava Hill.

"I'm sorry I said yuh're a doctor," Barney muttered. "I didn't think, son."

"How's a doctor going to drum up a practice unless folks know about him? It isn't ethical to put notices in the newspapers."

"One of the band may be sick or wounded," Lee said. "The cuss may be yore first patient."

"No," Doc groaned. "Why—"

"Get a move on, Doc," the outlaw warned. "Where's yore little black bag?"

"Three cars from here."

"Lady," the outlaw said, "get the doc's bag. If yuh forget to come back the doc's blood will be on yore hands."

"I'll come back," the woman promised. "I'll do anything—only don't kill folks."

The woman was halfway to the outlaw when a man decided to take a chance. His gun had just cleared the seat back when the outlaw saw the movement. The robber's gun coned flame about the muzzle and the man dropped, his gun firing once. The bullet shattered a lamp and oil spilled into the aisle near where the woman had dropped in terror.

"I ain't foolin' when I throw a gun on folks," the outlaw said to her. He had dropped his rôle of extreme politeness and was crisp, hard, ruthless. His true nature had come to the surface. "Now get up and get the doc's bag."

"I'll take a look at the man," Doc said.

"Stay where yuh are," the outlaw snarled.

"I'll take a look at the man," Doc said evenly. "My money is one thing. Human life is something else. Shoot and go to blazes!"

He turned his back on the outlaw and walked to the man. His flesh up and down the spine tingled, as if he were momentarily expecting the impact of hot lead. A brief glance was ample. He walked back.

"He's dead," he said.

"They most usually are when I shoot 'em," the outlaw said. "Now stand where yuh are."

The killing had had its effect. Every man in the smoker knew the odds were too great. Inwardly each seethed with indignation, but kept his head. Some day there would be a reckoning. There always was. They hoped that young Doc would be luckier than the last doctor was who was supposed to have been kidnaped by the Lava Hill outlaws. An old fellow, he had been, according to the story. He had left a good practice in the East to come West for his health. He had operated on a Lava Hill outlaw. His patient had died. No one ever heard of the doctor again.

The woman returned with the little black bag. She was panting.

"A man was shot in one of the other cars! Doctor—"

"Leave him alone," the outlaw snarled. "If that feller had done as he was told nothin' would have happened to him."

"How'd you like to go to thunder?" Doc said.

The outlaw kept the passengers subdued with one gun and thrust the other into Doc's back. A companion joined him.

"Havin' trouble, Ed?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ed answered. "This doctor has ideas."

"Blamed right," Doc angrily admitted. He snatched up his little black bag and said, "Blaze away if you want to." Then he stalked through the aisles of the cars until he reached the wounded man.

THE fellow, a rugged cowpuncher, was a pathetic sight—pale under his bronze coloring.

"I took a chance and lost," he gasped. "I'd do it again. Somebody's got to fight agin' them buzzards."

"Take it easy, brother," Doc advised. "I'm Doctor Jerry Burke. With any kind of luck you'll live to throw lead at outlaws again. Now this is going to hurt. I've got to sew up a pretty bad wound. Then you'll have to be rushed to a hospital where they'll perform an operation that will permanently stop the bleeding."

"I'm Ken Martin," the puncher said slowly. "Do what yuh have to do and I won't whine. Shore it hurts and will hurt, but my pride's hurt more, I guess. Gettin' a slug in my carcass without deliverin'

Bullets droned over Doc's head, then he heard the sound of men hastily mounting

one. Good of yuh to take a chance to help me. They might've killed yuh."

"I just realized I wasn't taking a chance," Doc answered. "That bunch of Lava Hill buzzards need me." He realized, also, that his patient was in a highly nervous state and decided it might help to let him talk.

When he finished the job, the outlaws forced him off the train. The man covering the engineer and fireman jumped down and took refuge behind a rock.

"Pull out!" he ordered.

CHAPTER II

First Patient

THE TRAIN got slowly under way, sending showers of coal cinders over the men. There were nine involved, Doc realized, when the train had moved away and train robbers on the other side were visible. He recognized efficiency when he saw it.

Ed, obviously in command, explained Doc's presence. "Mebbe it's too late, but we'll see what he can do," he concluded.

"Fine," Doc Jerry Burke thought, "my first patient is already on his last legs. And I'm supposed to work a miracle or maybe be killed."

Horses were waiting a hundred yards distant.

"How long before a posse will be on the trail?" Doc asked.

"Not soon enough to help you," Ed jeered. "We're mighty careful. We cut the telegraph wires."

"What's the nearest town?"

"Don't you know?" an owlhoot asked.

"I'm a tenderfoot," Doc told him. "I didn't intend leaving the train and settling down in the West right here. I planned to look around until I found a place I liked."

"Yuh'd better like Lava Hill," Ed said. "Yuh're goin' to put in a lot of time here. Mebbe yuh'll even be buried here."

He sized up Doc Jerry Burke. There was six feet of him and a hundred and seventy-five pounds. He had a dent in the bridge of an otherwise straight nose, and Ed wondered how that had happened. He was a quiet man apparently, and didn't look like a man who went around busting noses and getting his own busted. He didn't look like it at all.

"Can yuh ride a hoss?" Ed asked him.

"I probably won't fall out of the saddle," Doc answered, "but I'd planned to make professional calls in a rig of some kind, or a buckboard."

"Two of you boys ride double," Ed ordered, "and let Doc ride Pedro."

One of the other outlaws took the black bag, and Doc climbed onto the horse, or started to.

"Hey, yuh fool, mount from the other side!" Ed yelled. "Yuh want to get hurt?"

"What difference does it make to the horse?" Doc objected. "I weigh the same on either side."

He got into the saddle and clutched the horn. The horse turned his head around and looked at him. The outlaws laughed.

"Pedro don't know what to make of it," one said.

They moved off, single file, at a brisk pace. Doc Jerry Burke clutching the horn, swayed to right, then to left and sometimes jounced up and down in the saddle. When they stopped at a water hole, one of the outlaws blindfolded him.

"Go ahead," Doc said, "if it'll make you happy. I can't see anything in this infernal gloom anyway. And if it was broad daylight I'd be too busy hanging on to see where I was going."

Later they slowed down to a jog that lasted until midnight. Doc got slowly down from the saddle and limped around for a full minute. He knew that they had crossed small streams, and he had smelled pine woods. Someone brought a lantern.

"Doc, foller me," Ed said.

He led the way down a narrow trail, across a level stretch, then up to a low ridge. The lantern, swinging in the outlaw's hands, sent distorted shadows moving back and forth. Presently the light picked up mounds and head boards.

"This your private cemetery, Ed?" Doc asked.

"Now and again one of the boys dies," Ed explained. "Take a look at these two graves, side by side."

One headboard carried the name, "Ar-

thur Kent," whose age was twenty-seven. The other, "Mark Vance, M. D." The doctor's age was forty-nine.

"Notice those men died right close to each other," Ed said.

"Yes, a day apart," Doc said. "What happened?"

"Doc Vance operated on Art Kent," Ed said. "We told him we'd hang him if Art died. Art died!" A significant silence followed.

"I don't need to look into a crystal ball or consult a soothsayer to know you hanged Doc Vance," Doc said.

"Yuh undersand quick, Doc," Ed said grimly. "Now come down and have a look at a patient we got for yuh."

HE AGAIN led the way. A hundred yards from the nearest cabin he pointed to a cottonwood limb.

"That's the limb we use for our hangin' Doc. Yuh ever see a man hung?"

"No, I never did."

"They kick like sin," Ed informed. "I hope yore operation makes the patient well. It's a awful lot of trouble to hang a man. Yuh have to throw a rope over a limb. Somebody has to hang onto it. Somebody else has to tie a knot around the feller's neck. Then you have to stand him up on a hoss. Then several men have to get hold of the rope, or else tie it. Then yuh have to start the hoss. Later, yuh have to dig a grave, and that's hard work in this country. Yuh keep strikin' lava rock. Then yuh have to dump him in and fill up the grave."

"That last part shouldn't be hard work," Doc said. "All you have to do is to shove the dirt in."

Ed stopped, held the light to Doc's face and gazed at him intently for a long time.

"Yuh're a cool cuss," he said.

"You have to be cool and steady if you're a successful doctor," Doc answered.

They walked on and entered the largest cabin. A man propped up on dirty pillows opened his eyes slowly. The mere effort of lifting his eyelids appeared to tax his strength. Doc was reminded of a sick hawk.

Of all the men Doc had noticed in the outlaw gang, this man was most stamped with real leadership. For this man was "Buck" Brawley, and Ed was, of course, his brother. Doc had an idea the band had made an effort to keep Buck's condition a secret. Similar in weight and general build, even to huge hands, it had been an easy matter for Ed to assume his brother's place. The public, with a healthy respect for Buck's ruthlessness, had accepted Ed without question.

"Buck," Ed said, "this here's a doctor we got, along with a pretty good haul."

"He'd better be a good one," Buck Brawley said, hardly moving his lips. "Yuh told him about Doc Vance?"

"I showed him the graves before I brought him in," Ed said.

Buck Brawley's gaze measured Doc Burke. "Go to work," he said.

"First," Doc answered, "I want eight hours' sleep. You've lasted this long, so you'll hang on a while longer. My life is at stake here, and so is yours. I'm not going to operate in an exhausted condition."

"Go to work!" Buck roared. The effort cost him much, and he relaxed.

"You're running this bunch of outlaws," Doc said quietly. "But where wounds and sickness are involved, I'm boss. I'm taking orders from no man. If you don't like me professionally, get another doctor."

"Mighty big for yore britches," Buck said.

"Now here's what I want done. I want clean blankets put on your bed. I want the kitchen table scrubbed, then scalded with water. I—"

"Shut up!" Buck said testily. "Yuh talk like an old woman. A little dirt never hurt nobody."

"I like a fool, Brawley, but you suit me too well," Doc said. "You're a strong man. Or you *were* a strong man. You were hog-dirty. Your shirt was filthy. A bullet drove some of the cloth into your flesh when you were hit."

"A little dirt never hurt nobody," Brawley repeated stubbornly.

"Then get up off that bed," Doc ordered, "and lead your band. If you can't take a bullet wound you don't belong in this business."

A slow flush stole over the outlaw's face. Blood came from somewhere. The room was silent, except for an odd sound that puzzled Doc Burke, then he realized it was the ticking of the many gold and silver watches included in the bag of loot which had been put on the table for Buck

Brawley's inspection when he was equal to it.

Brawley threw aside his blankets.

"Ed," he said, "give me my gun."

Ed brought the .44 and Brawley grasped it in a wasted hand.

"Doc, yuh're goin' to die," he said.

"So are you," Doc answered. "And we'll argue it out after death. No, we won't either. We won't be going to the same place."

DOC stood there, watching the weak outlaw. His heart was pounding in his ears. From the first he had taken definite stands where his professional ethics were involved. He wouldn't compromise, couldn't compromise and hope to be a successful Western surgeon.

He watched the muzzle wobble, then grow steady. He saw the wasted finger tighten on the trigger, then the muzzle dropped and Buck Brawley sank back on the pillows. For a moment the weapon remained in his hand, then it slipped from his fingers. The clatter as it hit the floor was nerve-shattering.

"Doc," Ed Brawley said, "yuh should be hung, treatin' a hurt man like this."

"He's treating himself," Doc retorted. "If I were a member of the band, I'd obey orders. As a doctor I expect my orders to be obeyed. Now where'll I sleep?"

Ed looked at his brother for orders, but Buck Brawley was practically unconscious. Ed called one of the gang.

"Take him out to Pete's cabin," he directed "Keep things quiet. Doc wants to sleep. But *you* stay awake. We don't want him gettin' away."

"After watching my riding," Doc Burke observed, "do you think I could get away?"

He followed Pete to the cabin. The dirty bunk was hard to take, but he was pretty well exhausted from the hard ride and battle of wits. He tossed a while on the bunk and wondered if he would ever go to sleep. Then slowly he relaxed.

"You fool," he murmured softly. "I didn't realize you had it in you to stand up against death for professional ethics. Of course, every man thinks he'll do it. And hopes that he will. But he doesn't know until the chips are down. But where do you go if the patient lives? You know where you're going if he dies."

He laughed softly, when the impulse was to roar. But he knew that a guard was watching and listening just beyond the log walls and the guard might wonder what was so funny. On reflection, young Doc Burke wondered, too. . . .

Blazing sunlight awakened him. Birds were singing in the trees and he could hear the horses moving about. He opened the door and looked out. The guard eyed him sourly. "The top of the morning to you," Doc said, just to get the general reaction.

"Aw, go to blazes," the guard answered.

Doc stripped, went down to the creek and plunged in. He felt fine—equal to a half-dozen operations. It was odd, he thought, that the future seemed brighter today than it had last night, and yet his situation hadn't changed.

He could smell coffee and bacon from a nearby cabin and he went over as soon as he had dressed.

"I knew I shouldn't see how food is prepared," he thought, eyeing the man who was serving as cook, "but—" Aloud he said, "Do I cut in on this grub, or am I supposed to prepare my own?"

"Help yorself," the man said ungraciously.

When he came out of the cabin there was a rope with a hangman's noose dangling from the cottonwood limb. He walked over to the rope and put it about his neck, then removed it and headed for the Brawley cabin. Every man in the hideout was watching him.

"Good morning, Ed," he said cheerfully. "I just tried out the rope. Not a bad fit. Not bad at all. You should have one more knot, however. You see the knots exert a pressure, which breaks the neck. You have to be careful about such things. You wouldn't think of holding up a train without putting cartridges in all six chambers, would you."

"No," Ed answered with a seriousness that was laughable.

"Well, then," Doc admonished, "be careful of your knots in the future." He assumed a bedside manner. "How's the patient this morning?"

He checked Buck Brawley's pulse. The man scowled, but behind the scowl was a seriousness the young doctor didn't miss. Doc noticed that the table had been scrubbed. The same bedding was on the

bed, but a rope strung between cabins supported drying blankets. He took his time preparing the table. By that time the bedding was dry.

"Ed, scrub your hands," he ordered. "Here's soap. And make a good job of it."

CHAPTER III

No Gratitude

DOC made his first examination of the outlaw's wound, and he thought, "It's a wonder this fellow isn't dead. As a man I think death is long overdue for Buck Brawley. As a doctor, I shall try to pull him through."

He looked Brawley in the eyes. "The bullet still in there?" he asked.

"He dusted me on one side only," Buck Brawley answered.

"Meaning?"

"A bullet knocks dust from a man's shirt when it goes in, and again when it comes out," Ed explained. "The bullet's still in Buck. We tried to get it out with a jack-knife, but couldn't."

"It looks to me as if you'd been working on him with a dull spade," Doc Burke said. "Buck, do you want the truth?"

"Yeah."

"The wound is full of dirt. That's bad. It's got worse."

"Blood poisonin'?"

"A little. There might be more later." He couldn't go into professional details because the patient would never understand. "I'm going to put you out—to sleep." He indicated a bottle of chloroform. "When you wake up, the bullet will be out. You should have had a doctor the day you were shot. The odds are against you." He watched Brawley's eyes.

"Odds are agin' you, Doc," Ed Brawley said. "If he dies. Yuh ain't forgettin'?"

"How can I, when you keep reminding me?" Doc answered. "Now get some of the boys to lift Buck to the table. And keep that teakettle boiling."

When Buck had been lifted to the table, Doc made up the bed with clean blankets, then he scrubbed his hands again. He watched Buck's eyes closely as he gave him the chloroform, then he turned to Ed.

"I told you to tie him down to the table."

"Nobody in his right mind will tie Buck to the table when he's awake," Ed replied. He then tied his brother down.

"Now come around, and pour a few drops on the cotton over Buck's nose," Doc said. "I'll tell you how often."

Then he went to work. It was a difficult case, as the bullet had jammed against a shoulder bone and there was considerable infection. He removed the major part of the bullet first, then picked out the pieces. He cut away infected flesh, then sewed up the incision. Ed suddenly gasped and crashed to the floor.

"What'd yuh do to him?" an outlaw snarled, covering Doc with his gun.

"Nothing," Doc answered. "And don't be so free with that gun. I'm not armed. Pick up Ed and carry him outside. Dump a bucket of water over him."

They dragged Ed outside and returned.

"Now put Buck back to bed," Doc ordered. "You fellows wash your hands first, though."

"A little dirt don't hurt nobody," one said.

"A little dirt in a wound nearly killed Buck Brawley," Doc answered.

"Is he goin' to get well?"

"It's in the laps of the gods," Doc answered. "I did my best."

He cleaned up his instruments and himself, then went outside to the creek, leaving one of them to watch Buck. Ed was sick at the stomach.

"What'd yuh do to me?" he weakly demanded.

"Too many fumes," Doc answered. "If I were you fellows I'd go straight and get into decent, honest work. I've never seen so many chumps in my life. Your common sense should tell you I wouldn't be fool enough to do anything to you or anyone else." He lit a cigarette.

"Cigareets, eh?" Ed sneered. "Only sissies smoke 'em. Sissies and dudes. They ain't a man's smoke."

"A matter of opinion," Doc answered. "What else don't you like about me? Not that I give a hoot."

Ed lapsed into silence, and the man watching Buck gave a yell of alarm that

brought every member of the gang to the cabin. Buck Brawley was also sick at the stomach, and yelling for the doctor.

"Yuh made me worse," the patient accused.

"You'll feel better later," Doc answered.

BUCK cursed him weakly, but at length Doc sat down near the bed. Secretly he was worried. Buck's condition was poor, and there was no sense in his deceiving himself, though it was highly important that he deceive the others. Outwardly he radiated confidence. He was proud of himself in this respect.

Occasionally Doc Burke fell to reflecting on the procedure, should the patient die. A funeral, of course, then a hanging. He wondered how much of a chance he would have to make a break and ride for it?

He put in a bad night watching the patient's struggle for life. Shortly before dawn he thought Buck Brawley was dead, but Buck rallied and opened eyes that saw only fog.

"Where's everybody?" he whispered.

"In bed," Doc answered.

"Who're you?"

"Doc Burke," Doc answered.

This seemed to satisfy the outlaw.

Ed relieved Doc at six o'clock and Doc cooked a meal, ate it, and turned in. At ten they awakened him.

"He died," Ed said. "You killed him."

Doc Burke drew a long breath. "Why didn't you call me sooner? Why did you just sit there?" He looked around. "Who was watching him?"

"Andy," a man said uneasily.

Andy, shifty-eyed and nervous and far from quick-witted, licked his lips. Doc recognized him as a man you can fight best by crowding him and keeping him off balance.

"You deliberately let him die, Andy," Doc accused. "What's the matter? Want to be leader of the band yourself? I left word that I be called. You've heard men who were dying, breathe. You know how they sound. Or should. You've killed enough, like as not, in your time."

As he talked he was stalking to his patient's side. He whirled on Ed, his eyes blazing with indignation.

"Why did you tell me he was dead? He isn't dead. Were you trying to bring suspicion on Andy? I'm sorry, Andy, I talked rough to you. I didn't know Ed was trying to do you dirt."

He heard Andy flare up and Ed retort. Then they began punching away, without much damage. Doc wondered why there wasn't gun play. Neither attempted to go for the gun he wore. Probably Buck Brawley had given strict orders on that point.

Young Doc Burke's experience was comparatively limited. This outlaw was his first patient. At the hospital where he had served an internship there was always an older man to give advice. But Doc did have the advantage of the latest developments, and they served him well.

While the outlaws watched, Doc patiently fanned the faint spark of life into a sickly flame. They watched in amazement while he put a saline solution into Buck Brawley's veins to give the heart something to pump on.

When Doc turned in that night it was with the knowledge that the crisis was past. He now began to think of his own escape.

He reasoned that he knew too much. The men wore no masks, naturally, and each face had left a lasting impression. Early one morning he watched Buck Brawley walk slowly from his bed to a chair on the porch. At sight of him the men cheered.

There was no doubt of it, they held Buck in respect and fear. He answered their cheers with a snarled, "What you men been doin' while I was in bed? Ed! You been loafin'?"

"We figgered we'd better wait till you got well," Ed answered nervously. "The sheriff ain't bothered us none. But a deputy United States marshal was out huntin' us."

"How'd the marshal get into the deal?" Buck said. "None of his business." His eyes narrowed. "Was there mail on the train yuh held up?"

"Yeah," Ed admitted. "We didn't know it."

"Why the devil didn't yuh know?" Buck snapped. "Now if we're caught it'll be the Federal pen instead of the state's. Federal pens are harder to get out of."

"Got a new hoss for yuh, Buck," Ed said, hoping to quiet his brother.

"Bring him around for Buck to see,"

Doc said, quick to see a chance to quiet the outlaw leader.

THEY brought a black stallion that made a fever brightness come to Buck's eyes.

"Name's Diablo," Ed said. "He bucks like fury. But you'll know how to quiet him."

"I'd hate to be a high-spirited horse," Doc thought, "and have Buck quiet me."

Two men helped Buck Brawley to the horse and the outlaw leader examined him critically and with growing approval.

"Ed's almost weeping because he's pleased his brother," Doc thought in disgust.

"Buck, you'd better go back to bed," Doc said. "You've made good progress today, but there's no sense in overdoing it."

"I'll go to bed when I danged well please," Buck retorted.

"Go ahead and fall flat on your face before your men from weakness," Doc whispered. "I don't give a hoot."

Buck Brawley made a brief show of defiance, then went to bed. When he awakened the following morning Doc handed him a slip of paper.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Bill for professional services," Doc answered.

"A hundred dollars!" Brawley roared. "I won't pay it."

"Isn't your life worth a hundred dollars?" Doc asked. "There's some reward notices your boys have torn down that I've been looking over. You're worth five thousand dollars, dead or alive."

Brawley crumpled the bill and said, "Try and collect it."

"I'll leave you some medicine," Doc said. "Tomorrow I'll go on about my business. There're other people in the West who need a doctor."

Brawley's grin wasn't pleasant. "Yuh don't figger I'm crazy enough to turn yuh loose." He shook his head. "Doc, yuh ain't goin' to practice, as yuh call it, anywhere in the West."

"You owe me your life," Doc said. "Where's your gratitude?"

"Never had any," Brawley admitted. "Anyhow, I got a big deal cookin'. Some of the boys might get hurt and need a doctor."

"I'm just a tenderfoot," Doc said humbly. "If you don't turn me loose there isn't much I can do about it. Why, I'll have to have a guide to get out of these lava beds." He smiled. "Think it over. Be a nice fellow, Buck."

"I've thought it over," Brawley said. He called Ed and said, "We're keepin' Doc. He's kind of helpless except when operatin', so don't let him get lost."

"Buck, have yuh seen him on a hoss?" Ed roared with laughter.

"Go ahead and laugh," Doc said testily. "How can a tenderfoot know anything about horses? Give me time to learn to ride."

"Funniest sight I ever did see," Ed said. . . .

One night a week later, Doc went to bed but not to sleep. Within twenty-four hours he would be as dead as Doc Kent, free, or utterly lost in the lava hills.

He quietly left the cabin and a voice whispered:

"Where yuh goin', Doc?"

"Hello, Andy," Doc answered. "I'm escaping. And you're helping me. I want

[*Turn page*]

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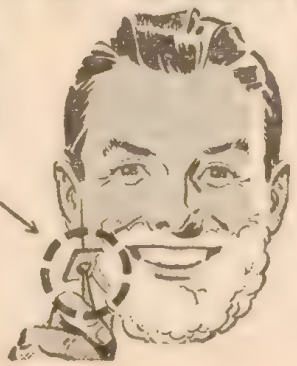

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the fastest horse."

Doc could almost hear Andy start sweating. "I'm goin' to yell, Doc. They'd kill me if I let yuh get away."

"You're going to be killed anyway, sooner or later," Doc whispered. "You fellows don't trust each other. You're held together by Buck's iron hand. Ed hates you. If a lawman doesn't kill you in a hold-up, Ed'll shoot you when he thinks he can get away with it. Andy, have you ever killed a man?"

"Not yet."

"It isn't too late for you to change. I'm talking to you like a brother, Andy. You aren't very smart. You know that, don't you?" Andy admitted it. "It isn't your fault. You didn't have a chance to go to school, Andy. You're the kind the Brawleys leave to hang or die while they get away. Andy, go out and saddle—Diablo."

"Shucks, Doc, you can't ride that hoss," Andy said.

"He's the fastest horse here," Doc answered, "and I can't get away on anything less. I can hang on."

Andy wiped his brow on the back of his hand.

"You're at the forks in the trail, Andy," Doc said. "You've been pretty weak at times in your life, but now's the chance to be strong."

"Go to bed," Andy whispered. "I gotta think."

Quietly Doc obeyed.

CHAPTER IV

In The Lava Beds

A TENSE half-hour passed and it was the longest Doc had ever known, then Andy tapped on the door. Doc picked up his little black bag and slung it across his shoulders. He followed Andy some distance. Two horses, saddled, were waiting in the gloom. One of them whinnied and Doc jumped a good three feet.

"Good glory, my nerves are tense," he muttered.

"Blasted stallion," Andy growled. "Wake up everybody."

"Nothing unusual about a stallion whinnying," Doc suggested.

"He's in the wrong direction," Andy explained. "If anybody heard him they'll know he's on the outbound trail."

Then Ed Brawley's voice bellowed, "Andy! Andy! Where's that Diablo hoss? Don't let him get away! Andy!" A six-gun cracked by way of arousing everyone.

As Doc grasped the saddle-horn and tried to mount Diablo, a voice yelled;

"Doc's gone! Andy's gone!"

"Lead'll fly," Andy predicted. Then he was off, leaning over the saddle, riding at top speed.

It was evident the outlaws had the range on the trail and could fire straight at night. Bullets droned over Doc's head as he struggled with the horse, then the firing abruptly stopped and he heard the sound of men hastily mounting. The outlaws were holding their fire, fearing they might hit one of their own men.

Diablo galloped down the trail. A low branch slapped Doc's face, reminding him to ride with his head bent low if he didn't want it knocked off. Diablo's pace increased as he warmed up.

A mile from the cabins he slowed down, picking his way over a switch-back that dropped into a canyon. As he crossed a small stream, Doc heard the outlaws on the switch-back above. Ed's voice echoed against the canyon walls.

"Kill Andy on sight! Get Doc alive if yuh can! He won't get far any way. Can't ride. Don't know the country."

Doc hoped they wouldn't kill Andy. It was through the flareup between Andy and Ed that Doc's suspicion of jealousy in the gang had been confirmed.

He had done a little fanning of this jealousy to learn something of the situation. And he had waited until Andy was on guard before attempting escape, feeling that if any man would help him, Andy would be the one. He had persuaded Andy that his only hope of a long life and happy one was to leave the Brawley outfit. But this wouldn't do Andy much good if he were killed.

Diablo came to an abrupt stop on the brink of a fifty-foot cliff and Doc realized the horse had taken the wrong trail. Doc listened. He could hear the outlaws crossing the stream he had crossed a few min-

utes ago. But instead of turning north and climbing out of the canyon as he had done, they were headed south.

"Diablo," he said, "you took a blind trail. Now we're behind the boys instead of out in front. We'll follow 'em."

He followed at a slower pace. He assumed the outlaws would logically conclude that Andy was heading for lawman country on the most direct route. Doc had originally gambled on Diablo obeying the homing instinct and taking him out of the Lava Hill region to civilization. Now his best chance appeared to be to follow the outlaws—at a safe distance—with the hope he could make a run for it when he was discovered. He didn't want to be hemmed in by streams, switch-backs and canyons when this happened.

He had entered the Lava Hill country at night which had given him no opportunity to establish landmarks in his mind. But he remembered the length of time required, and the approximate speed they had moved most of the night. When dawn finally broke and the sun touched the shadows of the distant peaks, Doc estimated he was within two miles of open country and perhaps five or six from the railroad.

Doc rode slowly now, ears searching for the slightest sound that would indicate the outlaw band's return. He rounded a turn and looked into Ed Brawley's gold-mounted six-guns.

"Figgered that was you, Doc," he said. "Couldn't be nobody else. Get down! Don't see how yuh got behind us. Another thing, I think yuh was foolin' us about not knowin' how to ride. Yuh couldn't've kept out in front long as yuh did."

"You're in pain, Ed," Doc answered, noting the man's pallor. "And you're scared. What's happened?"

"Horse fell and busted my leg," Ed said. "I guess everything must've went black. Next thing I knowed I was in the dirt, lookin' at the sky. I turned over and drug myself here."

Doc thought, "It's a long jump from the train robber, with his fake courtesy to women and his painful effort to use good English to this buzzard sprawled on the ground."

He dismounted, examined the leg, then opened his little black bag.

HE CUT splints from a piece of a lightning-shattered tree and then he was ready.

"Yuh fooled us," Ed said again. "Yuh pretended yuh couldn't ride."

"I knew if I ever expected to get out of this mess alive I'd have to use my wits," Doc answered. "Naturally, if you believed I couldn't ride you'd be less cautious."

"And yuh got Andy on yore side," Ed accused.

"No, Andy is obeying the first law of nature—self-preservation," Doc answered. "He had an idea you were going to kill him. And, from what I noticed, he was right." He handed Ed a piece of wood.

"What's that for?"

"To hang onto," Doc answered. "This is going to hurt."

"What's the matter with a sniff of that sweet smellin' stuff yuh give Buck?"

"I used up all I had on him," Doc answered.

Then he went to work. Ed groaned and gripped the wood until the knuckles were white against the skin. He swore with feeling, then was quiet. Doc grinned.

"Fainted dead away. I thought you would. When the ends of broken bones are brought together it doesn't feel good."

He finished the job, making free use of Ed's own shirt in binding the splints.

"You'll come to, soon, Ed," he said, "and you'll be as comfortable as I can make you until your partners return." He appropriated the gold-mounted guns. "My fee, Ed. I've learned that it's hard to collect fees from you fellows."

He was sorry that he couldn't have taken Buck Brawley's gold-mounted guns, also. They were of better make and the mountings more elaborate.

"They'd have made a nice fee," he thought.

Doc Jerry Burke followed the outlaws' trail for a couple of miles, then turned off. He was playing a hunch that the Lava Hill gang was about due to return. An hour passed before he saw the first rider. The others followed within five minutes.

"The first fellow will find Ed," he reflected, "and Ed will sound the alarm. Back will come man Number One, and the chase will be on. Still, their horses are tired and mine has taken it easy."

He rode rapidly for a mile, then slowed down.

"I guess," he thought, "we can ease up a little bit."

Then he saw lava dust boiling up off to the left, and he knew the band had taken one of its many short cuts to head him off. He estimated the probable point of interception, then moved considerably to the right.

The country was bad, and got worse. He saw the pursuing riders change their course and vanish.

"Another short cut," Doc thought. "No wonder they aren't caught. They know the country too well. Either they'll head me off, or get within rifle range."

A quarter-mile ride brought him to the brink of a canyon. He pulled up. Any ground that he could travel led toward a probable point of interception by the outlaws. There was no percentage in retreat.

"Let's go down, Diablo," he said.

He dismounted and began the descent. He kept one hand on brush and the other on a rope thrown over the saddle-horn. Several times he kept the horse from losing his balance by sheer bull strength. His shoes were full of small rocks and his pants in shreds when he reached the bottom. He looked up as he mounted, and saw heads against the blue sky. The Lava Hill outlaws were looking down, but making no attempt to follow.

"That's queer," he thought, then brightened. "They aren't following because they can't get back up that slope once they're down here. Hold on, Jerry. Maybe there's no way out but the way you came."

A trickle of water moved over the canyon floor, gathering in occasional pools. He was relaxing when a new sound came. At first he thought it was thunder—thunder in a cloudless sky. Then he realized it was a train crossing a bridge. He heard the locomotive whistle echoing through the mountain cliffs, and when he rounded the next turn in the canyon he saw the steel bridge. A hundred yards below a wooden bridge spanned the canyon.

A BREAK in the canyon wall a short distance below the wooden bridge led to the tableland above. He looked around, trying to get his bearings.

"Which way's west?" he asked himself.

He squinted at the sun, then decided. He turned onto a rutted, dusty road.

Presently dust boiled up in a cloud that moved steadily toward him. He saw a buckboard approaching and stopped. The driver pulled up his horses and his companion lifted a shotgun into view.

"One of the Lava Hill outlaws in broad daylight," the driver said. "Some of these days I'll start believin' in luck."

"I'm Doctor Jerry Burke," Doc said, "and I'm trying to get to the nearest town."

"If yuh're a doctor, then I'm a coyote's big brother," the driver said. "Yuh're ridin' Colonel Tench's horse, stole a while back, and yuh're wearin' gold-mounted guns. Yuh're Buck or Ed Brawley. Hank, pull the trigger and let him have it. We can't take no chances."

"Keep your shirts on, gentlemen," Doc advised, "and I'll keep my hands in the air. I was kidnaped by the Lava Hill outfit—taken from a train. Yes, I know you don't believe it. Sometimes even I wonder about it. I was taken to outlaw headquarters where I doctored Buck Brawley. Later—this morning, in fact—I escaped. I won't tell you Ed Brawley broke a leg and I set it and took his guns from him for a fee. You wouldn't believe that."

"Mister, yuh may not be the biggest liar in the West," the driver said, "but yuh shore rate honorable mention. Seems a shame to kill yuh off, but we're through taking chances with you fellows. Too many lost their lives. Ready, Hank?"

"Look at me!" Doc urged. "Am I tanned? No, sunburned! Are my clothes range clothes? No! Look at my shoes. Dude shoes with pointed toes. Lastly, here's the little black bag I bring babies in. And finally, if you can find a man named Barney Lee, he'll back me up."

"Where'd yuh get the hoss?"

"Stole it from the Brawley string," Doc answered.

"Get down," the driver ordered. Doc obeyed. "Back up!" Doc obeyed. He felt the shotgun muzzle against his ribs. Hands removed the gold-mounted guns. "Now turn around."

Doc turned around and the driver pulled off his own shirt, leaving him naked from belt to hat. "Show me where each of my insides is," he ordered.

Doc poked an unerring finger over the heart, stomach, liver, gall bladder and lungs. The driver thrust out a hand.

"Put her there, young feller. I'm Poke

Tupper of Lava City Tradin' Company. This is my brother, Hank. We apologize for doubtin' a gent's words. We believe yore story from start to finish. Foller us."

CHAPTER V

A Place To Settle

PROMPTLY the Tupper brothers turned around and drove to the Tupper House, a two-story brick hotel on Lava City's single main street.

"I hope yore idea of Western hospitality ain't based on the way Brawley's treated yuh," Poke Tupper said. "Make yoreself to home. It's on the house. Besides"—he grinned—"we've got an ax to grind. The folks hereabouts and the town need a doctor, and if yuh ain't promised to no place, look us over. We got a future here. You might have, too."

"Oh I intended to stay at the town nearest Lava Hill," Doc answered. "I don't mind a patient who says he can't afford my fee because he's dead broke. But when he laughs at me, as Buck Brawley did, I propose to do something about it."

The Tupper brothers exchanged glances. "Yuh *might* be the gent that's long overdue in Lava City," Poke said.

"I'm only half serious," Doc admitted. "But I am looking for a place to start my practice. And, for some reason, the idea of outlaws riding roughshod over peaceful folks, as the Brawley outfit is doing, goes against the grain. Where's the sheriff?"

"In his day Sheriff Dutton was a stem-winder," Poke said. "He made decent citizens out of badmen or put 'em under six feet of ground. He picked up wounds along the way, and some of 'em are botherin' him these days. He don't get around much, and folks haven't the heart to kick him out of office. When a town loses its gratitude it's in a bad way."

"What's the matter with an up and coming deputy sheriff?"

"We've been looking for one," Poke Tupper said. "Now suppose yuh rest up and then look us over. Yuh might like us, at that."

"Here're my trunk checks," Doc said as he was shown to a room. "Heaven only knows where the trunks are."

The trunks were not far away. Barney Lee, realizing Doc would want his trunks if he emerged from the Lava Hill country alive, had induced the train's baggage man to unload them. By the time Doc had washed off several weeks' accumulation of dust in a tub of hot water, the trunks were in his room. He had bathed repeatedly in the creek, and had made several stabs at taking a bath in a bucket of hot water, but there was no substitute for a tub. He trimmed his whiskers, put on a decent suit and good shoes, then went down to the lobby. Poke Tupper introduced him to several men, then led the way to the dining room. Barney Lee came in and shook hands warmly.

"How are yuh, Doc?" Barney said. "Watch out for these highbinders or they'll talk a leg off'n yuh."

They talked seriously about the town's need of a doctor and drug store, and Doc guessed that Barney Lee had already told them of Doc's own hopes. The presence of the Lava Hill outlaws had diverted cattle to another town, they explained. Mine clean-ups were going elsewhere, too. If, and when, Lava City got on its feet, it would then be in a position to receive large-scale cattle drives and ship out the beef without danger of rustlers—protected by the Brawleys—to raid the herds.

At first there wouldn't be much of a practice, they admitted, but as Doc's reputation grew the sick and injured would come great distances to him. Perhaps, even, the folks could chip in and build a little hospital.

"Not now," Poke explained, "but later on when the business comes this way and there's more money in circulation."

They let him see the town the next day, then provided him with a horse and rode miles over the range with him. From a high point he could look far below him, see Lava City and the glistening twin bands marking the railroad. Beyond, in the haze of distance, lay Lava Hill.

"A raid on the town's overdue," Poke Tupper said. "This time we figgered to be ready for 'em. The other times they took

us off guard."

"You won't have a raid for a while," Doc predicted. "Buck's slowly recovering from a wound. He can't take hard riding. And Ed's leg is in splints. The others lack the qualities of leadership."

"There's one thing against yore settlin' here," Tupper said, "and we wouldn't be fair men if we didn't warn yuh. You can identify every man in the Lava Hill band. They know it. No other honest man that I know of can identify 'em. They'll make a big effort to drygulch yuh."

"Drygulch?"

"Yes, shoot yuh without warnin'," Tupper explained.

"If I let that run me away I couldn't look myself in the face," Doc said.

HE WAS silent most of the way back to town, and those with him knew that he was making up his mind. They didn't put pressure on him. That was not their way. Show a man what you have, then let him exercise his own judgment was their way.

"I like these people," Doc was thinking, "and I believe they like me. That's important. But I haven't much money. It cost a barrel of it for my medical education. I'll rent a small room for a start and live in the rear."

When he arrived in town he said, "Show me what you've got for rent tomorrow."

"Plenty of choice," Tupper answered. "No need of tellin' yuh otherwise. The town's on its uppers."

Young Doctor Jerry Burke made his choice the next day. He divided a storeroom into quarters. He would live in the two back rooms. One front room would serve as an office, the waiting room of which would be in the other front room which would also serve as a drug store.

"I predict," Poke Tupper said, "that in a year's time the drug store will occupy the whole room and yuh'll have yore office on the second floor. And yuh'll be livin' in the best room in my hotel."

"It's something to shoot at," Doc said, grinning.

He pitched in, serving as carpenter's helper, during the alterations. He telegraphed East to have the equipment he had previously selected shipped, then he painted a sign and hung it over the walk on an iron bar jutting from the brick. It was dusted with black sand, which made the gold letters stand out. And it would sway slightly in the wind. It read:

JERRY BURKE, M. D.
PHYSICIAN & SURGEON

"What about office hours?" Poke asked.

"I'm not fretting about office hours," Doc Jerry Burke answered cheerfully. "I'm available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

The westbound train unloaded his first patient two weeks later—a cowpuncher pretty well shot up.

"One of the Lava Hill gang," the cowboy gasped. "I tried to shoot it out."

"Was he masked?"

"Yeah," the puncher answered. "Grain sack with holes cut in it."

Doc patched him up. Three days later a man came in on a buckboard. He had been wounded.

"I was huntin' deer," he explained. "Needed a little camp meat. Got too near the Lava Hill country, I guess. Somebody let me have it." The patient cussed a lot while Doc probed for the bullet. "Keep it for me, Doc. I'll have it made into a watch charm."

"And by the time you're a grandfather," Doc said, "the story you tell should be pretty good."

"Yep!" The man grinned in spite of his pain. "Me, single-handed, shootin' it out with the Lava Hill gang, and gettin' all fifty of 'em."

"Not quite fifty," Doc answered.

His stock of drugs came from the East and he arranged the shelves a few days later. This job was interrupted by a scared rancher who dropped off a lathered horse.

"One of two things," Doc thought. "He's at death's door himself, or his wife is having her first baby."

"Doc—quick!" he blurted. "I think the baby is comin'!"

He wasn't over twenty-one and his color under the tan was that of a green orange. His hands, big as hams, trembled like a cornered rabbit.

"Nothing to worry about," Doc said genially. "I've never lost mother, father or baby yet."

He left on his first baby case at a gallop.

"The first of many a stork race, I hope,"

he thought.

When he returned that afternoon, a wounded man was waiting for him.

"Did you see the fellow who shot you?" Doc asked.

"No, he was a long way off," the patient explained. "I was lookin' for a bunch of cattle that'd strayed. All of a sudden, I'm hit. It didn't knock me off'n my hoss. But it shore surprised me. I know of two other ranchers that was shot at while lookin' for lost beefs. Missed both times. I can't see why they don't wait till a man gets closer if they want to kill him."

"That," Doc answered, "is what is puzzling me. The previous case was like yours. The bullet came a long way and inflicted a painful, but not serious wound. I'm getting tired of having people wounded."

"Makes business for you, Doc," the patient said.

"I don't want that kind of business," Doc answered.

SEVERAL nights later he was sitting in his drug store and wondering when he would start breaking even. The street was dark and almost deserted. He saw the train come in, discharge a few passengers, then get under way again with labored grunts from the locomotive.

The grunts grew vague, then ended abruptly. . . .

Somewhere an anxious voice asked, "Feelin' better, Doc? Yuh goin' to be all right, Doc?"

Doc opened his eyes and wondered what he was doing in bed and how he got there. His head was aching.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" Poke Tupper asked. "We can't figger it out. Ten minutes after the train pulled out I came here to see if yuh had some cough medicine. The window was shattered and you was on the floor, bleedin' from a head wound. I tied a rag around yore head, wiped up the blood, and packed yuh to yore bed."

"A man who acts as his own doctor undoubtedly has a fool for a patient," Doc said, "but I can't call in anyone." He began examining the wound while Tupper held up a mirror. "No serious damage. I'm dizzy, but help me into the store."

Poke helped him to a chair in the store. The pair then checked on the situation.

"A bullet broke the window," Poke said. "It hit a piece of ore on the counter and it was the ore that fetched yuh a clout on the skull. Yuh couldn't have been more'n two feet from the ore at the time. That was close. My guess is the bullet was fired from the train."

"The would-be killer figured the sound of the locomotive getting started would drown out the report," Doc said. "My guess is one of the Lava Hill boys made a stab at killing the only man who can identify the gang." He toppled from the chair to the floor.

"My gosh," Tupper groaned. "He's passed out!"

"No, I haven't," Doc answered.

"Then what're yuh doin' on the floor? Tryin' to scare the daylights out of me?"

"Suppose the killer fired the shot then got off the train to check up?" Doc said. "Maybe he is planning to finish the job if he knows it isn't completed. Now here's what I want you to do—pretend I'm dead."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Board up the place. Hang crepe on the door. Dig a grave and bury a coffin."

"What's all this leadin' to?" Poke Tupper asked.

"Maybe nothing, possibly a showdown with the Lava Hill outlaws," Doc answered. "A nice wad of beef money will be coming into the Lava City State Bank within a week or so. Around the first of the month returns will come from the ore that Granite Peak Quartz Mining Company shipped out. It's a good time for the outlaws to strike. I've given this a lot of thought, Poke. I *know* that bunch. My guess is, they're feeling the pressure of a public that is getting madder and madder. They plan to make one last haul—a big one—and clear out."

"This will have to be managed without a leak," Poke said. "So far as I know every man in Lava City is on the square. But there's always a chance the Brawleys will have somebody planted."

"Then pick men you are sure of. For a starter there are your brother and you, Barney Lee, the blacksmith, livery stable man and the banker. Yes, and the sheriff."

"He's liable to talk to somebody," Poke Tupper said. "He has his own ideas. They're good enough for the mine run

outlaw, but it takes somethin' special to catch the Lava Hill bunch. The sheriff will ask this one and that what they think of the plan. No, we'll have to play this hand without him."

"Whatever you say," Doc answered.

"We'll have to let Jack the Barber in on the deal," Poke said.

"Barbers talk a lot, don't they?" Doc suggested.

"Yes, and Jack's a regular he-gossip about small things," Poke replied, "but he'll keep his trap shut when it's important. Besides, he's the town undertaker."

"You make plans and we'll see what happens," Doc said.

CHAPTER VI

His Own Funeral

FOR THE remainder of the evening there was a lot of running in and out by the Tupper brothers. Then "Jack the Barber" came and a heavy burden was packed to the rear of his barber shop by the Tupper Brothers, Jack, and Barney Lee.

The Tupper brothers boarded up the windows and door of Doc's place that night and hung crepe on the front door. Doc hoped that nothing more serious than a stomachache would develop in town in the immediate future. He wondered what he would do if a man were seriously wounded or hurt. Well, he knew. He would emerge and ruin the plans.

It was an odd experience to watch a man dig a grave on Boot Hill that was intended for him. It was odd to peer from the boarded window and watch pall bearers shove the coffin into Jack's hearse. Sam Johnson, the livery man, dressed in solemn black, drove the hearse.

There were at least fifty who trudged to the grave.

"Not a half bad funeral for a man who has been in town about two months," Doc thought. "I wonder what they said about me? Probably tossed aside my faults as unworthy of mention, and endowed me with no end of virtues."

When the excitement of his own funeral ended, a period of dreary days followed. He put in the hours reading profound medical books and watching the strangers who came into town. The first of the month found the bank loaded.

That evening two men drifted into town, put up their horses at the livery stable, got a room at the Tupper House, then walked across the street to the Dutchman's Saloon. They had a beer and came out. They ordered a good meal at Ah Sing's café, then loafed near the general store. They explained that they were cowpunchers looking over the country. They wanted to know whether there were ranches in the back country needing top-hands, and gravely wrote down names on the back of envelopes.

Poke Tupper stopped to light a cigar squarely in front of Doc's drug store.

"Two of the Lava Hill gang has arrived," Doc said. "They're stopping at your place."

"I wondered," Poke said, and went on.

Two placer miners arrived during the night. Their packs were dusty, their clothing badly worn, but their gold pans were bright enough.

"A sign they've been panning gold recently," Doc thought, "but they haven't. Two more of Brawley's bunch are here."

He was beginning to catch something of the pattern of operation. Men, unmasked, would arrive, establish themselves, then play the rôle of innocent bystanders when the shooting started. Mingling with honest citizens they would be in a position to pick off anyone who might become dangerous to the masked members of the gang. Later, when the job was done, and the sheriff's posse was in the hills, they would quietly vanish to cut in on their share of the loot when it was divided up.

It explained why the band's operations were so successful. Buck Brawley did a lot of planning.

"Buck isn't the only one planning on this job," Doc thought.

Two more men arrived at noon. One was a stranger, but his partner was one of Brawley's men. They were hardrock men, they said, and they had heard there was a quartz proposition in the back country. Were they hiring men?

Poke Tupper came in the back door of

Doc's place at one o'clock.

"We've assigned a man to watch every Brawley man," he reported. "He don't tag him around, but he does keep an eye on him. Now—what?"

"I hope you didn't nail the boards too tight on the front door," Doc answered. "I may want to emerge in a hurry."

"We've talked about that, Doc," Tupper said. "You stay in here where yuh won't get hurt. I know that's askin' a lot, but yuh'll be needed to fix up the wounded. Yuh've got to admit that makes sense."

"Oh, yes, it makes sense, but it doesn't suit me a little bit," Doc answered.

"It'll have to suit yuh," Tupper said. "Now we've done about all the plannin' we can do. The rest depends on what the Brawleys do. Then it'll be a question of which thinks fastest."

He went out and nailed the back door firmly. Then to make sure Doc wouldn't change his mind, he nailed the front door while Doc cursed.

NEVER had Doc felt as helpless. He couldn't yell in protest, nor smash down the door. To do so would be a warning to men of the Lava Hill band. He fumed and waited, then relaxed. He spread out his surgical instruments to remind himself that his first duty was to humanity, and that he had no business exposing himself to lead.

He saw three men, faces well-covered by hats pulled down over the eyes, jog out of a cross street and turn toward the bank.

"Buck Brawley!" he exclaimed. "I only got a glimpse of him, but I'd know that profile anywhere."

The shooting started a moment later. He heard bullets whine past the door; and the shatter of glass as lead was fired into windows to discourage peering at proceedings. He heard shouting, and men running to escape the hail of lead. A dull explosion shook the building.

"Blew the safe!" Doc muttered.

He saw a man drawing a bead on an outlaw, then an unmasked outlaw drew a bead on the townman. Poke Tupper knocked the outlaw cold, and it was the first indication to the Lava Hill gang that things were not going according to plan. The man whose life Tupper had saved, fired, never realizing he had been in danger, and there was a roar of pain from someone.

"Ed Brawley yelps like that when he's hurt," Doc thought with satisfaction.

He saw Buck Brawley, riding low, making his bid for escape. Twenty-dollar gold pieces were spilling from a bag he was clutching. They would hit, bounce, and roll. Buck's horse went down, and the outlaw leader jumped clear, went to his knees, then jumped up, gold-mounted guns ready. He was now masked.

He ran to a lumber pile and got behind it. An outlaw, riding to his rescue, tumbled from the saddle, but the horse stopped within fifty feet of Buck.

"Here Dan—here Dan!" Buck called to the horse. "Come on, boy! Come on!"

The horse put his ears forward, then walked toward Brawley. Dust spurted up as citizens tried to kill the horse and prevent Brawley's escape.

"Come on, Dan, boy!" Brawley urged.

He turned suddenly and fired at a man who was running to gain cover that would flank him. The man went down.

Doc picked up the guns he had taken from Ed, then hurled his weight against the door. The barricade held and bounced him back. He hit it again and again and heard the nails groan as the impact pulled them from the wood. The door flew open and Doc came out shooting. His appearance would create a sensation and—diverson.

For one brief moment Buck Brawley's eyes were wide with surprise; and a citizen, unarmed, and crouching behind sacks of grain said:

"I buried that cuss. What's he doin' here?"

The man looked as if he might swear off drinking.

"Doublecrossed!" Brawley said savagely.

He ignored the others and began concentrating his fire on Doc. Kill Doc, he reasoned, and he would be rid of a dangerous witness.

Doc was shooting as he advanced. His lead was coming close, but a man charging an entrenched man can't take time for accuracy. First the right-hand gun, then the left-hand gun blazed. He saw the killer lust in Brawley's eyes die and stark terror come. Brawley's final shots were desperate and wild. Doc heard the lead

drone past his head, but he ignored it. His attack on the outlaw was watched by every human in the town who wasn't actively engaged with the band.

Poke Tupper saw it out of the corner of his eye, and his brother risked death for a quick glance. The outlaws, fighting their way out, saw it. They saw their leader suddenly dash his gold-mounted guns to the ground and raise his hands in token of surrender. It took the heart out of them.

When an enraged group of citizens is closing in with flaming guns the noose for past crimes doesn't seem as near. All around, the Lava Hill outlaws were quitting.

"Yank that grain sack off your head, Brawley," Doc ordered.

Brawley obeyed. He stood there, reaching for the air, his huge hands shaking.

The sheriff, aroused by the uproar, had winged an outlaw and was now taking charge. He slipped the handcuffs on Brawley.

"Remember, Sheriff, I captured him," Doc said.

"I'll never forget it, Doc," the sheriff replied. "It was the finest exhibition of raw courage I've seen in a lifetime on the range. Brawley never had a chance against yuh."

"You're right, Sheriff," Doc said. "Against *me* he didn't have a chance, but not for the reason you think."

THE SHERIFF looked surprised. It wasn't like this young doctor to blow about himself. He wasn't like that at all.

Doc picked up the gold-mounted guns.

"I'm taking them in full payment for services rendered, Brawley," he said. "You fellows aren't much on paying your bills. It takes a bit of doing to collect them."

Brawley cursed him, but Doc took no offense. A winner could be generous and make allowance for a beaten man's feelings, or he could gloat. Doc had never felt like gloating over any man. He left details to the sheriff and his fellow citizens. There were wounded needing attention, and Jack the Barber was waiting for Doc to pronounce three men dead before he took charge.

It was midnight before Doc had completed his last operation and had made outlaw and citizen alike comfortable. But no one was sleepy. Excitement was a stimulant that kept even the children awake. A special deputy was preventing citizens from "prospecting" in the street's deep dust to reclaim the gold twenties the outlaws had spilled.

Tomorrow there would be a careful screening.

"Come on over to the dinin' room, Doc," Poke Tupper said. "We've fixed up a mighty fine steak dinner and it's on the house."

"Thanks," Doc answered. "I did miss my evening meal."

When they had finished, the fifteen men gathered about the table looked at Poke Tupper.

"Doc," Poke said, "yuh're a wonderful surgeon, but an awful chump. Why did yuh charge straight at Buck Brawley?"

"He was about to kill some fine citizens," Doc answered. "That was the chief reason. Next, there was a five-thousand-dollar reward for his capture. And I need five thousand dollars to buy a little more hospital equipment, drug store stock, and to eat on until things get better."

"With the Lava Hill outlaws hanged or behind bars," Poke answered, "things will get better pronto. I looked at Ed Brawley's wounds before I came over. He's goin' to get well and stand trial. Buck wasn't scratched."

"Yuh'd better learn to shoot before yuh pull a trick like that again," Poke's brother said. "Yuh didn't come within three feet of him at any time. I examined the lumber around the place where he was crouched."

"I didn't have to come within three feet of him," Doc answered. "All I had to do was to keep coming, with guns blazing. You see he was my patient, my first patient, in fact. Somehow I didn't want to kill him. It went against the professional grain, I suppose. Also, having been my patient I had learned something about him. He had been wounded, had felt the impact of hot lead against his flesh. He was a coward. I saw fear in his eyes whenever I performed the smallest kind of operation. And I knew that he would quit the first time he lost the upper hand and some fellow with blazing guns crowded him—crowded him hard. I crowded."

Rainy Night in Latigo

By JACKSON COLE

Warren Foster returns to his old stamping grounds—and stamps out a number of old scores!

"This is as far as you go," snapped Foster

NIGHT had descended, but the rain still poured down, just as it had done all the long weary day. On the south road leading into the town of Latigo the going was slippery because of the mud. Warren Foster rode slumped down in his saddle, his clothes wet and soggy and cold against his skin. The big bay he rode was drenched and tired and traveled at a walk.

"Welcome to Latigo, Dan," Foster told the horse. "Maybe!"

The horse snorted as though he had his own opinion about that. His hoofs made sloshing noises in the mud. The falling rain was like a curtain that sometimes hid and sometimes revealed the lights of the little cowtown.

They traveled along the main street, and Warren Foster's gaze was fixed on the square adobe building that was the sheriff's office and the jail. That was his destination, and he wondered what Sheriff Cort Bishop's reaction would be when he saw his visitor.

"He shore won't kill any fatted calf," Foster said. "Unless he shoots me." Foster grinned and he was suddenly young and rugged despite his bedraggled appearance. "And I'm not fat or calf-like."

At the sheriff's office he dismounted, leading the bay under a lean-to at the side of the building, and leaving the horse ground-hitched there, protected from the rain.

His saddle-roll that had been wrapped in his slicker was missing. It had been stolen just the night before last. In Foster's estimation there was something cheap way down deep in a man who would steal someone's personal possessions like that.

Foster walked to the door of the sheriff's office. It was closed and he knocked. In a moment the door opened and Cort Bishop stood there, a big man with dark hair and a dark mustache, who looked dry and comfortable in the light from the oil lamp

on the desk. His expression did not change as he recognized Foster.

"Come in," the sheriff said. "So you finally got here."

"Finally—after five years," Foster said as he stepped inside. "Wasn't shore I would be welcome, Cort."

"I'm not certain about that either," Bishop's tone was dry. "A sensible man would wear a slicker in weather like this, Warren."

WARREN FOSTER grinned at the older man, then sneezed.

"He would if he had one," he said. "Vic Markham stole my saddle-roll night before last. My slicker was part of it."

"Vic Markham!" The sheriff walked over to his desk and sat down. "He threatened to kill me the next time he saw me."

"So did I," said Foster dispassionately. "Anger makes big noises, Cort. I was eighteen when you ordered me to leave town five years ago. Too hot-tempered and maybe a little young for my age." He shivered from the dampness of his clothes. "Now I'm twenty-three and I've been around."

"I was younger then and this job was new," Sheriff Bishop said. "I never was able to prove that you stole that money from Hank Lawson's feed store." The lawman's tone changed, and there was more warmth in his voice. "You'll find dry clothes in the back room. Reckon my stuff'll fit yuh now."

"Thanks." Foster moved toward the door of the room off the office that the sheriff used as his sleeping and living quarters, then hesitated as though fearing a trap. "You've changed, Cort."

"Perhaps," Bishop said. "But I'm still the Law. Hurry up and change yore clothes before you get pneumonia."

There was something in the way the sheriff voiced the last words that made Foster hurry into the bedroom. Bishop carried plenty of authority in his tone, and Foster had been used to taking the older man's orders ten years ago. Then Foster had been just a kid, and Cort Bishop was the *segundo* of the Double X outfit.

Later, when Foster was eighteen and running around with a wild bunch of town loafers, Cort Bishop had been elected sheriff. Then there had come a rainy night such as this one. Warren Foster remembered it all vividly as he took off his wet clothes and dried himself with a towel.

Foster had seen two figures sneak into the narrow alleyway between the Peoples Bank and the feed and grain store. Curious, Foster had followed. He had reached the alley just in time to see two figures leap out of an open window of the feed store and escape behind the buildings.

Realizing there was no chance of catching the two fleeing men or boys—Foster never was sure which they had been—he had gone out of the front entrance of the alleyway and bumped right into Sheriff Bishop.

"What were you doin', sneakin' around in that alley?" the sheriff had demanded. Foster hadn't liked his tone.

"None of your business," he had answered.

There had been more words. Afterwards when Bishop learned that two hundred dollars had been stolen from the feed store, he placed Foster under arrest. Foster told the story of the two figures he had seen escaping from the feed store but no one seemed to believe him. Yet there was no actual evidence that Foster had committed the robbery. The sheriff had released him and ordered him out of the town and out of the county.

In his anger Foster had threatened to kill the sheriff if he ever saw the lawman again. No one had heard the threat except Bishop and one of the town loafers named Vic Markham.

That had been five years ago. Since then Foster had worked on a good many ranches and proved himself a salty hombre when it came to gun trouble.

He dressed and found that the sheriff's clothes fitted him fairly well, for they were both about the same size. He buckled on his gunbelt and then stepped back into the office.

"Feel better?" Bishop asked.

"A heap better, thanks," Foster said. "I shore was soakin' wet."

The sheriff rose from the desk and moved over to a chair near a side window of the office.

"How did you happen to run into Vic Markham?" the sheriff asked.

"Tell you about that after I unsaddle my horse," said Foster. "Is there some

place I can leave him until mornin', Sheriff?"

"Shore," said Bishop. "There's an extra stall in that barn out back where I keep my two horses. Put yore bronc there, Warren."

"Thanks, Cort."

FOSTER stepped out of the front door of the office and closed it after him. The rain had slackened a little, but it was still coming down. By keeping beneath the overhang that ran along the front of the building until he reached the lean-to at the side Foster managed to not get wet again. He led the bay back to the barn and inside. Then he unsaddled the horse and gave it a rubdown. When this was done he placed the bay in the empty stall, watered him, and gave him some oats.

As Foster walked back to the sheriff's office, he peered in through the side window. Here the roof protected the window to such an extent that the glass was not wet from the rain. Foster saw the sheriff was dozing as he sat in a chair near this window.

"What the blue blazes!" Foster exclaimed, suddenly growing tense as he peered in through the window.

The door of the office silently opened and a slicker clad figure stood there with a gun in his hand. A beard covered the lower part of his face, and a black mask hid the upper part. Slowly he raised the gun in his hand and aimed it at Sheriff Bishop.

"Look out, Sheriff!" Foster shouted, but he knew that the closed window muffled his voice. "Look out!"

His gun flashed into his hand, the long barrel came down hard against the lower pane of the window. The glass shattered and dropped to the ground. Foster thrust the upper part of his body in through the window. With his left hand he grabbed the sheriff by the shirt front and thrust him back.

The man in the doorway fired. His bullet missed the sheriff's head by inches and tore out through the hole in the window. Foster's gun roared and the masked man cursed as the slug seared his left arm. He leaped back, slamming the door of the office shut from the outside.

"Get him, Sheriff!" shouted Foster. "Don't let him get away!"

Bishop drew his gun, leaped to the door and flung it open. He peered out. The rainswept street was deserted. The masked man had disappeared.

"Gettin' careless, ain't yuh, Cort?" asked Foster from the window, dropping his gun back into the holster. "Another moment and that jasper would have downed you."

"Didn't figger there was anybody around but you," said the sheriff, shoving his gun back into leather. "You're right—I've been plumb careless. Any idea who the masked man might be?"

"Vic Markham," said Foster. "He's wearin' my slicker."

"How do you know?" asked Bishop. "Slickers look pretty much alike to me."

"The one he is wearin' has my initials on the upper part of the right sleeve," said Foster. "You said Markham threatened to kill yuh? I want to hear about that. Wait until I come inside."

He left the window and hurried around the door of the office and entered. Something on the floor near the door caught

[*Turn page*]

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his eye and he picked it up. It was a diamond and ruby stickpin. Foster studied it as did the sheriff. Then they looked at each other.

"When the feed store was robbed five years ago," Bishop said, "Hank Lawson lost a stickpin like that."

"First I heard of it," said Foster truthfully. "Why didn't anyone mention the pin?"

"Figgered the robbers might think no one knew about the pin and start wearin' it," said the sheriff. "No one did up to now."

"Me, I never liked rubies." Foster handed the pin to the sheriff. "When and why did Markham threaten to kill you?"

"About a month after you left," said Bishop. "He was gettin' too big for his boots, so I ordered him out of town." The sheriff grinned a bit ruefully. "I ordered a lot of folks out of town in those days. Markham threatened to come back some dark night and kill me."

"What with the rain and all, tonight is dark enough," said Foster. He went to the open door and stared out at the neat two-story building across the street that housed the Peoples Bank. "You know I don't think that masked man came to town just to try and kill you, Sheriff."

"What then?" asked Bishop.

"Tomorrow's the first of the month," said Foster. "That's when most of the ranchers around here pay their outfits. There should be a lot of money in the bank right now."

"There is," said the sheriff.

THEN from the rear of the building there came the roar of a muffled explosion. The rain was coming down harder and lightning flashed, while thunder rumbled. Foster would have thought the roar was part of the noises of the storm, if he hadn't been so sure it came from the bank.

"The bank!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Somebody blew the vault open. Come on!"

Bishop dashed out into the street and ran toward the bank. Foster started to follow the sheriff and then halted as he saw a horse standing in the shadows near the sheriff's office, a horse that had not been there a few moments ago.

Acting on a sudden hunch Foster ducked back into the shadows and waited. The sheriff disappeared around the corner of the bank building without looking back. From the alleyway between the other side of the bank and the feed store appeared a slicker clad man. He raced across the street, carrying a bag filled with bank money in one hand, as he headed for the saddled horse that stood patiently waiting.

"This is as far as you go, Markham," snapped Foster stepping out of the shadows, and covering the masked man with his gun. "When you stole my saddle-roll the other night, I didn't like it, but when you sneak into the sheriff's barn and saddle my bay horse figgerin' to use him for a getaway after robbin' the bank, that's going too far. Lucky I recognized the horse standin' there or you might have got away with it."

The sheriff came running back across the street as he saw Foster standing there covering the masked man. It was Vic Markham all right, and after he had been placed in jail he admitted that he and a town loafer now dead, had been the ones who had robbed the feed store.

"Why did yuh come back here tonight, Warren?" the sheriff asked when the excitement had died down, and the two men were alone in the office. "I've been wonderin' about that."

"To try and clear myself of that old robbery business," said Foster. "And to see if mebbe you might be able to use a deputy, Cort."

"I could," said Bishop.

"Good," said Foster as they shook hands. "You know I got so used to havin' you boss me around when I was a button, that I kind of missed it!"

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Featured Next Issue

BLAZE FACE

A Novelet of Horses and Men

By L. P. HOLMES

The APPALOOSA HORSES of the INDIANS

Among equines the cowboys rode, the Appaloosa is one of the most weirdly colored and one of the least understood

WHILE the palomino continues to remain our undisputed mystery horse of the West, the Appaloosa is the least known. So few are the facts pertaining to this horse that we find them confused constantly with other types. Yet the Appaloosa, for all intents and purposes, practically originated in America as a type. It is one of the most weirdly colored of the many singular horses that belong to our fantastic old Far West.

The Appaloosa was the ideal mount for the Indians of our Northwest. Of this one it can be certainly said that it *was* the Indians' horse. On it the Nez Perce, the Palous, Cayuse and Shoshone tribes rode the war and hunting trails.

By coat color and Arab lineage of centuries ago, the Appaloosa is slightly akin to the other spotted horses, the polka dot, rain drop, leopard spot, Libyan leopard, and the best known of them all today, the South American Criollo.

Spots on Solid Colors

The polka dots and rain drops may be of any basic coat color with spots and markings of any other contrasting color. The leopard horses, however, must possess such vivid markings in one of the darker colors, hence their name. Most of these horses are what is known as "sabinos,"—leopard colored.

While the Criollo is also considered a leopard horse, it is basically white with such markings distributed all over the body. First established in Argentina, 1910, as a breed, this beautiful horse is found all over South America. It is now being bred widely in America. This is the horse most often carelessly confused with the

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DICK GRIFFITH, world champion trick and fancy rider and his Appaloosa stallion

Appaloosa. You see it in all the big time rodeos and rodeo parades.

The real Appaloosa in color and mark-

the third in a series

by GLADWELL RICHARDSON

ings favors none of these other spotted horses anywhere near close enough to be mistaken for them. Yet this is what happens all the time. I am disposed to lay the matter to what I have heard cowboys declare all my life:

"There is always one good reason for arguments, horses and wimmin!"

Differences of opinion is what makes "horse talk" worthwhile.

Many Writers Are Confused

In the work of the best artists and writers you will find other coat color-type spotted horses labeled "authentically" by them as Appaloosa. (The work of Will James is the only exception I know of.) Many horse breeders both advertise and spread mistakenly the belief all spotted horses, except the leopards, and especially that the Criollo, are Appaloosas.

But when we dig into the meager history of the Appaloosa, there exists small reason for error. Fortunately the horse romancers haven't turned their hand to accounting weirdly for the Appaloosa as yet, so that the actual story is hardly clouded with diverse arguments.

The Appaloosa stands from 13.2 hands to 15.3. In Indian warfare days it was well under 14 hands, which definitely made it a "pony." It may contain any of the usual and general markings on the head. The forepart of the body may also show up as any color except white, being of all the various shades of the basic coat colors including legs. But the forepart of the body must be free of all spots.

The rear half of the body, and this must be true of the rumps, is always white and contains dark-colored spots of varying size in no regular pattern.

This white is not of the bright hue of the albino. It often is a muddy, or a washed-out shade in appearance. Sometimes it may be referred to as gray by the unknowing. The Appaloosa foal is part white from birth. On the other hand the color gray is never on a foal, since it becomes such by the time factor only, a lightening of some other color by successive sheddings.

Provided the coat color has the necessary markings, there is one sure means of determining the Appaloosa. The majority of them possess a "rat tail"—that is, a tail without long hair. This is not an ironclad rule, since some will have a normal tail, but most of them do not, and this was invariably true of the Indian bred Appaloosa.

There is little doubt these spotted horses came originally from the slender, glossy skinned, light Libyan leopard horses. But that distant heritage is the only kinship the Appaloosa could have with them.

While it is true the Appaloosa derived directly from spotted horses of the Spaniards, they were nurtured, selected, culled and bred as a distinct type in America more than 150 years ago. Strange as it may seem, this was done, not by the scientific breeding of the white man, but by catch-as-catch-can methods of the Indian. How all this came about is one of the unwritten fascinating tales of our pioneer times.

Descendants of Spanish Breeds

The Spaniards brought into the Southwest spotted horses that were stolen by the Shoshone Indians of the upper Rocky Mountain regions. It was this tribe that traded and sold the first horses that they owned to the northwest Indians. By 1780 all these tribes were well mounted, and raising horses for their own use.

French fur traders and trappers ventured into a river valley in what is now the states of Washington and Idaho. They gave this river a name, "Palouse." In the valley of this stream they encountered a tribe of Indians who owned great numbers of white rump spotted horses, whom they in turned called "Palous." This same tribe is mentioned by missionaries, traders, trappers and explorers from that period on, under one of twenty-odd ways of spelling the name.

By accident, it would seem, the Palous Indians used oddly spotted horses for their first mounts. They fancied in particular those marked only on the white of the rump, and turned their hand to producing more of them until they actually established a blood line. Fortunately there were no factors present to produce a heterozygous condition, and thus this peculiarily spotted animal "bred true." That is, these characteristics, without variation, continued to be inherited, and produced identical coat patterns in the offspring. They thus in time obtained the

type we now call "Appaloosa."

A little later surrounding tribes of the Palous in the Palouse river valley, such as the Nez Perce, came to desire this spotted horse, and in turn took to breeding it. We may presume also an economic factor entered into the Appaloosa's production, since the Palous tribe was small and soon found themselves with more of these horses than they could use themselves. By 1780 this breed was becoming extensive, and we find mention and description of the Appaloosa by Lewis and Clark in 1804, and by Cass again in 1806.

Appaloosas Attract Attention

After beginning of settlement in the West, when the trails were opened and more or less guarded to Oregon and California, we find the Appaloosa coming in for greater attention. The Indians protested against settlement of their best land, the driving of game from their hunting grounds, which brought on the Néz Perce war under Chief Joseph. He led his red eagles on their spotted horses against the soldiers. The military in their reports mention the animal as being widely owned and fancied by the Indians engaged in battle.

The Indians' "Palouse" horse as it was originally called from its habitat, was slender, short coupled and fleet-footed. Intelligent, it could be trained for hunting buffalo, and by its stamina was admirably adapted to rocky terrain and arid areas where water holes were few and far between.

The Indian possessed a more practical reason for breeding the Appaloosa. Its peculiar color combination and markings made it easy to blend with the background of prairie or mountainside. As a work of camouflage Nature put into it all the essentials. The white rumps were not a "true" white. They are dull looking in most cases. The rump color could hide in the moonlight and starlight, that heavenly brilliance of the high country which lightens up the night to an astonishing degree.

Appaloosas Hard to See

The two color combination splitting the body in two, with the lighter portion further disguised by spots, gave the Indian a mount that was extremely difficult to see very far away even in broad daylight. One section "killed" the other so that any visible portion became some other fancied shape in the landscape.

The color of the front part of the body, including the forelegs, ranges from a dark brown that may seem a black, up through the lighter basic coat colors and combinations of them. There is even a light buckskin, and such combinations of roan, red, bay, bluish, or even strawberry. At the Pocatello, Idaho, rodeo, I have seen Appaloosas well spotted on the rump, spots in the forepart of such a shade of "pink" as to throw off a purplish hue in the sun. The cowboy who rode that horse was mighty proud of it.

Until the Pacific northwest became mainly cattle country, away from the irrigated valleys, the Appaloosa was known only by the name of the locality where its breeding became standardized by non-reservation Indians. It was always some form of "Palouse." (Palous, Paloos, Pelouse, etc.) Then came the cowman who referred to the horse as "a pelouse," next the cowboy, whom we suspect must have had a very broad drawl who called the animal a "Palousey," in a vague attempt to preserve the French final "e." Gradually this changed with the times to "a plousey" and thence as commonly accepted use, the "Appaloosa" of today.

Moors Rode Spotted Horses

Our researchers and horse historians tell us the spotted horse reached Spain with the Moorish invasions of the 8th Century, and thence into Mexico and South America 700 years later. Spanish records do state that with Cortez, during the conquest of Mexica, was one "Moron, a soldier," who owned a spotted roan stallion. Other records show that, later on, other spotted horses were brought into the Southwest of the United States. It was, of course, from this source, eventually via the raiding Shoshone Indians, that the Palous of Palouse river valley obtained their breeding stock.

But from this point on in the hands of the Palous the Spanish spotted ponies ceased to be such. In coat pattern, type, and character they were little like any others to come out of the Southwest. They

would have been strange even to their original progenitors. What the Indians did was to establish, over a long period of time and in a special habitat, a horse they most desired, that without their realizing it, became a "breed." Too, it has even been given a hybrid name, not of Spanish origin, but a little of French, which in turn became "Americanized" into nothing sounding like French at all.

Ranchers Try Improvements

Very early horse ranchers in Montana and Utah tried to put into the Appaloosa desirable qualities from other strains—the heavier body from the Morgan, and speed from the Arabian and Quarter horse. These attempts were not very successful, since most often the dominant features of character of the Appaloosa descended to a queer mixture having little relation to the foundation stock. The original intent was thereby lost.

There were Appaloosa horses in the wild (feral) herds of the Northwest. Naturally there should have been since they were produced in the country. However, such does not appear to have been the case among the wild horses in the Southwest. I remember herds of two and three thousand, with not an Appaloosa among them. Old-time wild horse hunters tell me the same thing, the Appaloosa was never in the Southwest. It remained strictly a product of its original area until recent times.

The manner and length of the time required to develop the Appaloosa is the reason why it seems to me that the breed and type "practically originated" in our western America. The factors were of a special age and place for definite purposes.

In fact the Appaloosa can claim an older blood line than some of our better known and more prized, registered breeds, of which one of the now most sought after, the Steeldust of the Quarter Horse strain, did not come into recognition until about 1857.

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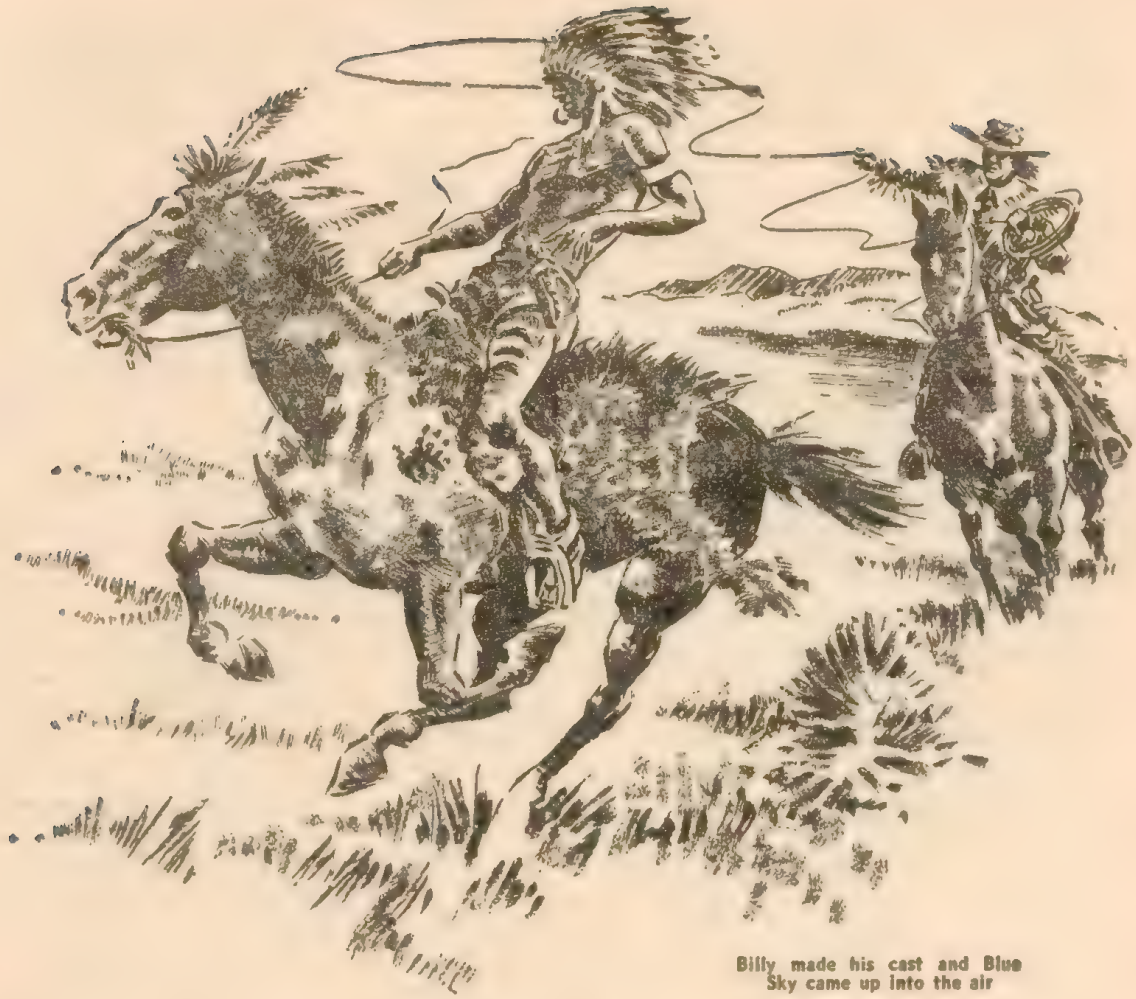


Billy made his cast and Blue Sky came up into the air

Buckskin Man's Pasear

Buffalo Billy Bates uses stern tactics when Indians go rampaging and a Cavalry captain spurns his advice!

THERE was an angry glint in the tawny eyes of "Buffalo Billy" Bates as he watched the smoke columns. He decided grumpily that it would be about like Captain Ezra Todd, commanding a small cavalry patrol here on the plains, to allow his men to build too much fire.

"No wonder I've been five days locatin' that cuss!" Billy muttered. "He's close to a hundred miles west of where he was told to patrol."

Billy brushed sinewy fingers through his chestnut hair he wore shoulder length, after the fashion of other scouts and plainsmen, then jerked a flat-crowned beaver hat on with an angry tug. He gazed out across the big broken foothills toward the smoke, a somewhat youthfully silky moustache bristling as his lips tightened.

By SCOTT CARLETON

It was at least four miles, he judged, to the canyon from which that smoke was coming. And it would be a hard trip over those boulder-flanged ridges and through cedar-choked gulches.

"But I've got to get hold of Todd, and tell him that Colonel Drake wants him," Billy sighed resignedly.

He walked off the ridge where he had stood, his moccasins making only small sounds in the grass, the fringe along the seams of his buckskin jacket and trousers fluttering. He was deep-chested, long-limbed and rangy, yet he moved with the flowing ease of a great cat as he moved down into a swale where a fine bay gelding stood over trailed reins. Billy unlooped a belt from the saddle-horn that held his brass-bound Dragoon Colt and sheathed scalping knife, quickly fastening the pliant leather about his flat middle.

"Guess we've found that Ezra Todd galoot at last, boy," Billy muttered, patting the bay's sleek neck as he mounted.

Billy pushed back into the big hills without delay, wanting to reach that canyon from which the smoke had been coming as soon as possible. But before he had gone a mile, there was tension in him, and he began avoiding ridges and open slopes. The country was rough and wild, and should have been full of game. Yet Billy's expert eyes found only an occasional fresh deer track in the many runs he crossed. But there were plenty of pony tracks, the prints of unshod horses!

"Indians in these hills, and a lot of 'em!" Billy thought gravely. "They've killed and scared about all the game out. That Blue Sky renegade and his pack of Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho followers could be holed up in here, by gollies."

EVEN suspecting that Blue Sky, a Sioux renegade who had blazed a trail of death and terror across the frontier, might be in these hills put Billy Bates on needles and pins. He got his horse into the heaviest timber he could find along the gulches, and was debating the wisdom of penetrating any deeper into the hills when he reined his gelding to a sudden stop.

The cedars where Billy had halted were so dense he could see neither of the slopes that reared sharply above the crooked gulch. But unshod hoofs were rattling on the nearest slope, and he heard voices, raised in mild argument. Billy felt the hair along the nape of his neck lift like bristles, for those riders up there were speaking the Sioux tongue, which Billy knew well!

"Blue Sky is foolish!" an Indian said grumpily. "We have hunted the game from these hills. Our older men say we should move to better hunting grounds, yet Blue Sky will not go."

"Blue Sky is wise, not foolish," a second Sioux argued. "The white man's soldier-warriors are many, and they still hunt us. Even now Blue Sky must decide what is to be done about those few soldier-warriors who are near us."

"We are many!" a third Indian declared. "We should go to the camp those soldier-warriors have made yonder where the hills stop, and kill them all."

When the clicking hoofs and complaining voices faded away, Billy Bates drew a slow breath, brushing a dew of sweat off his face with a buckskin sleeve.

"That Blue Sky renegade *is* holed up in these hills!" he thought grimly. "And the soldiers that buck said were camped 'down where the hills stop' would be Cap Todd and his patrol, I reckon. If I don't want my hair lifted, I'd better get to heck out of here."

Billy reached down, slid a Spencer repeating rifle from a saddle-boot under his right stirrup fender, and laid the gun across his lap. He went back through the hills with the long gun handy, tawny eyes watching every ridge and brush patch. But he got out of the hills and down to the flat bosom of the vast, green sea of grass that was the plain, without sighting the Sioux hunting party he had so narrowly missed meeting head-on.

Billy started riding west by south, following the contour of the hills, keen eyes searching the rolling green sea of grass about him. He judged that he had traveled a couple of miles when he saw the smoke, lifting lazily out of a swale due south. He put his gelding down across the plains at a stiff canter, not surprised when he topped a swell and saw the cavalry encampment below him, small but neat.

There were two stout supply wagons and an ambulance, with a row of tents on beyond. As he loped down the gentle slope toward the encampment, Billy saw

hobbled mules down the sink, and on beyond those were the cavalry mounts, grazing under the watchful eyes of two troopers.

Billy was nearing the supply wagons, pulling his horse down, when he saw the two men step away from one of the vehicles, look at him a moment, then come toward him, walking fast. One of the men was tall and thin, the other short, pudgy. As they advanced, Billy saw that the pudgy one was a second lieutenant, while the tall fellow wore a sergeant's stripes. Billy swung out of saddle, trailed his gelding's reins as the yellow-legs strode up.

"Welcome to our camp, buckskin man!" the lieutenant said pleasantly. "Scout?"

"I'm Billy Bates, workin' under Bill Cody, chief of all scouts," Billy said, and nodded. "Is this Captain Ezra Todd's command?"

"Captain Todd is our commander." The lieutenant nodded. "I'm Lieutenant Castle, Bates. This is Sergeant Al Duckworth."

Billy shook hands with both men, studying them keenly, without seeming to do so. The lieutenant was young—a shavie not long out of West Point, Billy guessed. Sergeant Duckworth was leather-brown, grizzled, and had that unmistakable stamp of long service about him.

"I've heard a lot of good about you, Billy Bates," the sergeant said as they shook hands briefly. "Yuh're a lucky feller, havin' Bill Cody rescue yuh from wild Injuns, put yuh through school, then teach yuh scoutin', huntin' and the like."

"I'm more than just lucky, havin' Bill Cody for a friend," Billy said quietly. "And I'd better deliver the message I've got for yore captain, then hike back north, if I want to keep on Bill's good side. I've been five days, locatin' you people. Is that Cap Todd, yonder?"

SERGEANT DUCKWORTH glanced over his shoulder, then whirled, snapped to attention, and saluted as a tall, dark man strode up. He wore a captain's bars, and Billy felt the impact of shiny black eyes that were not friendly.

"At ease!" Captain Todd snapped, returning the sergeant's salute.

"This buckskin man is Billy Bates, sir," Lieutenant Castle said. "He says he has a message for you."

The captain looked sharply at Billy, frowning, not offering to shake hands.

"Billy Bates, Bill Cody's protégé, eh?" the captain grunted. "You've a message for me?"

"From yore commandin' officer, Colonel Guy Drake," Billy said. "He asked me to find yuh, and tell yuh he wants yuh to come to his headquarters, over yonder on the Arkansas, on the double."

"Humph!" Captain Todd snorted. "That all old Guy Drake had to say?"

"That's all the Colonel asked me to tell yuh," Billy said quietly. "But if yuh've got any notions about ignorin' that order, yuh'd be wise to give 'em up. The Colonel is boilin'. Seems he told yuh to patrol the McCandlass Sink country, and has learned that yuh're not there."

"Watch your tongue, Bates!" the captain snapped harshly.

"I just thought I'd warn yuh." Billy shrugged. "Ever hear of a renegade named Blue Sky, Captain?"

Captain Todd's face r e d d e n e d, his mouth jerking into a thin, angry line. He glared at Billy Bates for a long moment, obviously hard put to keep a hold on his temper.

"Of course I've heard of Blue Sky!" he said finally. "He and his murderous followers are said to have killed some sixty whites within the past year."

"Yuh came over here, nearly a hundred miles from where yuh're supposed to be patrolin', to hunt Blue Sky?" Billy asked quietly.

"It's none of your blasted business, Bates!" The captain glared. "But it so happens that a buffalo hunter and his skinners came past the McCandlass Sink, and said they had seen Cheyenne, Arapaho and Sioux Indians over here. They pulled out of this sector, fearing that Indians they had seen were some of Blue Sky's bunch."

"So that's how yuh happened to poke over here." Billy frowned. "But this camp looks new. Just arrive?"

"Late yesterday afternoon!" the captain grunted. "We're sending out our first patrols, this morning."

"Instead of sendin' out patrols, yuh'd better strike camp and get to blazes away from here!" Billy said bluntly. "Blue Sky and his whole killer pack are camped yonder in those big hills, and have been

camped there a long time."

Billy explained how he had narrowly missed running into the Sioux hunting party earlier, and repeated what he had overheard them saying. Lieutenant Castle's mouth popped open, and stayed that way. Sergeant Duckworth's leathery face crawled and tightened, and there was a bright sheen of excitement and worry in his sharp gray eyes.

But Billy watched Captain Ezra Todd more closely than he watched the others, and a feeling of uneasiness came over the scout as he saw strange excitement change the captain's dark eyes to narrow, flaming crescents.

"Bates, I've been on frontier duty only a year!" the captain burst out finally. "But I've learned that you buckskin rascals are the worst bunch of windjammers on earth. Yet if you could be telling the truth, if Blue Sky should be within my reach, I'd count this the luckiest day of my life!"

"What's eatin' yuh?" Billy asked sharply.

"Never mind!" Captain Todd said hastily. "But don't leave camp, Bates. I'll have orders for you, later on."

BEFORE Billy could even attempt a reply, the captain jerked a hand at Lieutenant Castle, and the two officers went striding away, that strange excitement still shining in Todd's black eyes.

"That fat's in the fire for shore, Billy Bates!" Sergeant Duckworth groaned when the officers were out of hearing.

"Mebbe not," Billy replied. "If Todd will strike camp and pull deeper into the plains, I doubt if Blue Sky will bother yuh."

"The captain will order camp struck, bank on that!" the sergeant said grimly. "But not to pull off to some safe point until reinforcements can be called up. We'll attack Blue Sky's camp, Billy!"

"What?" Billy cried. "Todd ain't crazy, is he?"

"He's crazy for a promotion he's been tryin' to wangle," the sergeant answered. "He thinks that promotion will be cinched if he captures Blue Sky."

"But good grief, man!" Billy groaned. "Blue Sky's camp is in rugged canyon country. Go in there with a handful of men like this detachment of yours, and not a one of yuh will live to tell the tale."

"It's the men I'm worried about, Billy," the old sergeant said harshly. "They're just kids, and as green as this grass we're standin' on. I'm the only man in this whole bunch who has ever seen action against Injuns or anybody else."

"Blazes!" Billy exclaimed. "Well, Todd has to be brought to his senses, and that's for shore. I'll see what I can do with him."

But Captain Ezra Todd would listen to nothing except the sweet refrain of his own imagined gain and glory to come with the capture of Blue Sky. Billy Bates realized that now, yet he stuck doggedly to his chosen course of trying to reason with Todd. He followed the captain through the noise and stir of a camp being struck, talking until his throat felt raw and tired.

"Todd, listen to me!" Billy suddenly blocked the captain's path.

"Confound you, Bates, get away from me!" the officer growled angrily.

"Do yuh understand that yuh're takin' these green troops to certain death if yuh attack Blue Sky's camp?" Billy asked sharply.

"Poppycock!" The captain glared. "Stop heckling me, or I'll have you put under guard."

"Yuh're putting thoughts of personal gain and personal glory ahead of the safety and welfare of yore men!" Billy charged. "Yuh could be stood on a parade ground and have yore bars lifted and yore buttons sliced off for such a stunt, Todd!"

Before the officer could reply to that, Sergeant Duckworth came trotting up, saluted, and reported that camp was struck, the troops ready to move.

"You, Bates!" Captain Todd snapped. "Mount, ride forward, and lead the way to Blue Sky's encampment. That's an order!"

The captain turned and stamped away. Billy was glad, for his temper was boiling over. He waited there, pulling in a deep breath, forcing back the rage and bitterness that assailed him. Then he turned and trotted to his horse, tawny eyes stormy as he went into the saddle. He loped past the troops just as Todd's ringing command put them in saddles.

Billy's mind cooled, working rapidly as he went out across the plains. There was, he believed, one slim hope of thwarting

Captain Todd's suicidal intentions of storming Blue Sky's camp.

"For all their toughness, Blue Sky and his hair-snatchers are afraid of the Army," Billy muttered. "Now if I can pull these troops up ridges and across enough open ground, the Indians are apt to spot us. And if they see us comin' in time, there's a chance Blue Sky and his warriors will take to their heels. But if Todd got a notion of what I'm up to—"

Billy ducked so violently he almost fell off his horse. He had been studying the distant ridges, paying no heed to the fact that he had topped a ridge, where a brushy ravine lay before him. But when a bullet knocked a hole in the brim of his hat he took notice of his more immediate surroundings, tawny eyes blazing as he saw naked brown horsemen scuttling away through the brush.

Billy stripped his Spencer from the saddle-boot, caught an Indian in the sights, and knocked him tumbling, first shot. He fired twice more before the Indians got around a bend in the crooked ravine, grinning tightly when his third shot unhorsed another warwhoop.

"Bates, what's the meaning of this!" Captain Todd bawled as he reared up. "You had no orders to fire, confound you!"

"Listen, whistle-britches!" Billy lashed out coldly. "Yuh see this hole in my hat brim? Well, a slug put it there. Any time somebody shoots that close to my head, I don't aim to wait for orders to fire."

THE troops halted, craning their necks as they peered into the brushy ravine below the crest. Captain Todd's face was white with rage, and for seconds Billy thought the officer would lunge at him.

"I see a dead Indian, down yonder!" Lieutenant Castle said sharply.

"There's another dead one, where the draw makes that sharp bend, yonder." Billy pointed with his chin, still watching Captain Todd's raging face.

"How many of the Indians were there, Billy?" Sergeant Duckworth asked.

"Couldn't tell," the scout replied. "They were in that brush. But I don't like the way they acted."

"Lieutenant, take the troops and ride into that ravine!" Captain Todd was howling. "Beat the brush, thoroughly. I'll be on the high ridge, east there. Watch me for signaled advice."

"Todd, I've got a hunch those Indians wanted the troops to foller 'em," Billy gritted. "And when a warwhoop wants yuh to chase him, it's generally bad medicine to accommodate him."

Captain Todd sneered, put his horse down the slope at a reckless pace. The troops had vanished in the thickets now, and the captain was angling across the gulch, heading for the steep ridge on the far side. Billy followed, tight-lipped and worried. He saw Captain Todd's powerful black charger suddenly arch up into the air in a powerful leap. But instead of landing as it should have, the black nosed over, throwing the officer hard.

Billy hurried his own horse forward, scowling when he saw the yawning ditch Todd had attempted to jump. Billy swung to the right, jumped his horse across safely at a narrow point, then loped back to where Captain Todd was on his feet, cursing dazedly as he examined his mount.

"Give me a hand here, will you, Bates?" the captain called.

Totally unsuspecting, Billy dismounted, turned, and took a step toward the captain. But the captain was no longer bent over, holding the charger's foreleg. Todd was rushing Billy, a mocking grin twisting his lips. He nailed the scout in the midriff with a long right that hurt, and caught him full on the jaw with a quick, poking left.

"Sleep tight, mister!" Todd laughed as Billy crashed down.

Captain Todd whirled, plunged toward Billy's waiting horse. He seized and turned a stirrup, stuck a boot toe in it, and was lifting himself when a hoarse growl of sound caused him to look hastily around. Billy Bates was almost on top of him, purple-faced from that blow to the solar-plexus, and a little glassy of eye from the clip on the jaw.

But the big buckskin man was traveling like a pouncing cougar, and Captain Todd sprang desperately aside, cursing as he clawed at the flap of his service holster. He got the flap unfastened and was plucking at the pistol butt when Billy Bates hit him full in the face.

"Wait, you fool!" Todd groaned, stumbling backwards.

Billy bored in, wrenched the pistol

from Todd's hand, and flung it aside. Then the scout hit Ezra Todd again, a fast, clean blow that went straight to the chin. Billy straightened up slowly, gasping for air, feeling tenderly of his stomach.

"All right, blast yuh!" the scout muttered.

A very few minutes later, Captain Ezra Todd was lying down in the deep ditch he had foolishly forced his horse to jump. The captain was hogtied, his wrists and ankles drawn together behind his back. He was gagged with his own handkerchief, and lay panting and sweating now, a wild rage in his staring eyes as he looked up at Billy.

But Billy Bates was paying slight attention to his prisoner. Head canted, he stood listening, a tenseness coming over him. Rifles were chattering somewhere up that brushy ravine, the sound swelling at times, then diminishing to a few scattered shots.

"Hear that shootin', yuh pig-headed fool?" Billy glowered down at the captain. "The troops have hubbed trouble. And it's no runnin' fight."

Captain Todd wiggled and muttered and glared, his face turning purple with rage and exertion. Billy scrambled out of the ditch, found his hat and tugged it on hastily. He picked up the reins of Captain Todd's horse, watching the horse limp badly as he led it a few steps.

"Sprained yore right shoulder, eh, fella?" the scout said quietly.

BILLY stripped saddle and bridle from the fine black charger, dumped the gear down into the ditch near the writhing captain, then turned about, leaped aboard his own horse, and lit out up the rough slope and along the crest. He pushed his horse up the ridge until the sound of exploding guns was loud in his ears, then reined into a nest of sheltering boulders, and went forward on foot, crawling the last few rods. And as Billy peered out and down, he knew shock that was like a physical hurt, it was so intense.

Directly below him was an almost circular basin, clean of brush except along the dun bluffs that reared up, twenty-five to sixty feet high, all around it. A narrow slot that cut through the walls at the down-canyon end of the basin was the only possible way in or out of the place. Scattered over the floor of the little sink, gleaming white in the bright sun, were mounds of bones.

"A natural game trap!" Billy gasped. "Indians have used the place for that, herdin' deer and antelope in here, to butcher for winter food."

Billy's voice tightened up. The troops were in there! The men had hidden as best they could in the fringe of brush along the west side of the sink, opposite Billy's position. He could see their carbines spit flame and smoke toward the rims, and toward the craggy bluffs there at the knife-cut opening into the basin. And along those rims, and in the snaggly rocks on each side of that entrance, Billy saw Indians lying prone, their naked hides glistening in the sun as they fired steadily down into that scanty covert where the troops were trying to hide.

Billy eased back beneath the screening cedars, then turned and began working his way toward the snaggly bluffs that reared above the entrance to the sink. He moved with infinite care, yet hurried, knowing that the troops had been deliberately led into this awful trap, and that warriors would already have gone racing to Blue Sky's camp with the news.

"And it'd be less than two miles from here to the canyon where Blue Sky is camped," Billy panted. "Unless I can do somethin', and do it blamed fast, those troops . . . Well, well!"

Billy's voice ended in a guttural growl. He had crawled to the lower edge of the cedars, directly opposite the bluffs that speared up above the entrance to the sink. He was less than twenty paces from those broken snags of stone above the narrow cut, and staring at three stalwart Indians who crouched there, firing rifles down into the brush where the troopers were hiding.

"Cheyennes!" Billy breathed.

He slithered forward, getting behind an upslanted stone that would give him protection. And the instant he moved, one of the Cheyennes jerked around, fierce eyes widening as he saw the buckskin man.

Billy's Dragoon boomed, and the Indian jumped straight up, a shuddering wail on his lips as blood gouted from a hole above his heart. The other two came alive as if angry bees had swooped down on them, and a .50 Sharps in the hands of one of

them threw a slug that made the ground rock under Billy's flank.

But the tawny-eyed scout's Dragoon kept coughing hoarse thunder, and the buck with the Sharps suddenly went over backward, pinwheeling down into the narrow cut. The second Cheyenne leaped toward better cover, but took a bullet through the ribs before he got there.

Billy hastily reloaded his hot pistol, darting down the snaggly boulders as he finished. He holstered the Dragoon, snatched up a single-shot Sharps .50 that lay among the rocks. There was a leather pouch, with a shoulder strap, lying near the gun. The scout grinned tightly when he saw that the pouch was more than half full of the huge, brass cartridges for the Sharps.

"Some murdered buffalo hunter's gun and cartridge bag, no doubt!" Billy grunted, and flattened out hastily as slugs came whamming into the rocks from directly across the cut.

Billy crawled to where he could see across the chasm, eyes narrowing when he saw a savage face peering around a rock. He lined the Sharps and pulled the trigger, feeling the big gun shake him. But an almost headless Indian was diving down into the cut from the opposite side, and Billy hastily reloaded the Sharps, searching for another target.

A MOCCASIN-CLAD foot was showing past a snag of rock, and when the Sharps boomed an Indian leaped high into the air, howling in mingled rage and pain. Before the warwhoop could gather his wits and take cover, Billy's Dragoon threw a slug into him that knocked him off the precipice.

"Duckworth!" Billy bawled. "Yuh hear me, Sergeant?"

"And never will I hear a more welcome voice!" the sergeant yelled back. "Billy, if the captain ain't with yuh, get to him and tell him that we've got ourselves in a fix. If we don't retreat, and do it right now, we never will!"

"Lieutenant Castle is yore commandin' officer!" Billy cut in sharply. "Don't waste time askin' how come. Get in saddles, and get those men out of there!"

The Indians strung out around the rim of the sink were yak-yaking worse than a pack of coyotes, sensing that something had gone wrong among the guards they had left at the narrow passage along each rim of the sink. Billy put the Sharps to work, and the swarm of .50 caliber slugs he sent squalling down those rims had the Indians scuttling for cover, yapping worse than ever. Then Billy dropped the hot buffalo gun and went sprinting up the slope to his gelding, for the troops were pouring out of the death trap now.

Billy sprang aboard his own horse, turned back along the ridge, and was starting down an open slope, intending to intercept the troops, when he saw the Indians. They were perhaps a half-mile away, pouring over a bald ridge in a flowing line, their ponies at a dead run. Billy groaned, sent his horse rocketing down into the brushy canyon, frantically waving Lieutenant Castle and Sergeant Duckworth to halt as they came toward him with the troops.

"What happened to Captain Todd, Bates?" Lieutenant Castle gasped as he pulled in.

"He tried to jump his hoss across a ditch and didn't make it!" Billy snapped. "There's no time to talk about it. Blue Sky and his whole pack are about on top of us."

"Where, Billy?" the grizzled sergeant asked crisply.

"Yonder!" Billy jerked his chin at the ridges. "Lieutenant Castle is in command, and the say is his, naturally. But I know, and reckon you know, Sergeant Duckworth, that our only hope of keepin' our scalps is to hop to the top of this ridge, keep under cover until the warwhoops are close, then pour lead to 'em."

"If we try retreatin' through these brushy canyons, sir, we'll get pocketed up again, brought to bay, and wiped out!" the sergeant told the nervous young shavetail.

"I'm so darned scared I'd rather run than anything else I can think of, Al," the lieutenant said, and grinned feebly. "But you and Billy Bates have been into these things before, and know what to do. Put these men anywhere you want them, Sergeant Duckworth."

The lanky sergeant gave an order that swung the single file of horsemen, sent them scrambling up the steep slope. The noise and confused jockeying lasted only a few minutes, then the men were on foot,

crawling to the crest of the crooked ridge. Billy Bates looked down into a shallow valley, his eyes grave.

"They'll come down that slope over there, Duckworth," he called. "They'll come this way because they'd want to hit this canyon we just left, and go up that to the narrow entrance to that boneyard where they think you men are trapped."

"We'll let 'em get on the meadow in that valley below us, yonder, before we fire, eh, Billy?" the sergeant asked.

"Let 'em come plumb across, to the base of this slope," Billy advised. "And break yore men into three groups, Duckworth."

"Three groups?" Lieutenant Castle asked tensely. "Small as our forces are, wouldn't it be best to stick together, Billy?"

"We'll stick together, all right," Billy told him quietly. "The groups I mentioned are to be assigned particular targetin' areas. Group One will fire at the foremost Indians, Group Two will fire into the middle of the bunch, and Group Three will fire on the rear fringes of the enemy ranks."

"But why the scattered target areas?" the lieutenant asked uneasily.

"That's an old trick these buckskin lads like Billy Bates have learned, sir," Sergeant Duckworth explained quickly. "And it's a mighty effective one, too. The Indians, seein' their comrades fallin' front, center and to the rear, will think they're up against a lot bigger force than they are, and will be afraid to charge us."

"Here they come!" Billy sang out.

SERGEANT DUCKWORTH'S voice droned out, calling names, putting the men into three groups. He assigned each group a leader, and instructed them along the lines Billy had suggested as to where they were to concentrate their firing.

"No shootin' until the order is given, then fire at will, and as fast as dead-center sightin' will let yuh!" the sergeant finished.

"Look at those devils!" Lieutenant Castle gulped. "Billy, there are hundreds of them."

"Thousands of them, sir!" a sweating trooper stretched out nearby gulped.

"Over two hundred of them, that's sure," Billy said quietly.

Billy's tawny eyes were narrow, gleaming in satisfaction as he watched the Indians advance along the opposite slope, coming at a good clip. The scout's eyes were glued to a stalwart buck who rode about the center of the long flowing line. The big buck had on an eagle-feather warbonnet, and was yelling and waving to the warriors as they came down the slope.

"Blue Sky!" Billy said under his breath. "Now if I could get a bullet into that hellion, this shindig might be over in a hurry!"

Billy could hear the troopers around him breathing tensely, as the Indians came down the far slope and into the valley. The sounds of their galloping ponies rolled up like thunder as they swept forward, coming almost directly toward the troops. The sun struck hot glints from their rifles and spear heads and their sweating hides, and Billy could feel his own nerves tighten as the horde raced in toward the base of the slope below him.

"Fire!" Sergeant Duckworth's gravelly voice roared the command, and the concussion of forty rifles blazing almost simultaneously made the air shake.

There were gobbling howls of rage and alarm there at the base of the slope, and Indians spinning down from their ponies in a tangle of death and confusion. The carbines along the ridge top were roaring steadily now, throwing the Indians into confusion. Billy saw Indians darting out of that milling tangle singly and in small groups, to flatten down over the flying manes of ponies that were streaking back across the valley.

But Billy's keen eyes were riveted on Blue Sky, who had fought his pony free of the mêlée and was streaking up the valley alone, tossing a rifle aside as he fled. Billy started to line his smoking rifle, then grinned suddenly, whirled back to where he had left his horse, and leaped into saddle.

Lieutenant Castle shouted something, but Billy tore past the troops, then down the slope into the valley, his powerful horse hitting full stride on the valley floor. Billy unfastened the reata from the pommel of his saddle, and gave the bay its head.

Billy built a small noose, his grin widening as the swift mount under him closed in. He twirled the loop over his

head a couple of times, then made his cast. The trained gelding squatted, skidding to a dead stop. Blue Sky came up into the air, bellowing like a roped bull. Billy hopped off his horse and went down the reata, but Blue Sky had come down on his feather-crowned noggin, and was out cold. "The next rope yuh feel, mister, will be around yore blasted neck!" the scout said grimly.

Billy strapped his reata to the saddle pommel, then picked Blue Sky up, tossed him across the saddle, and mounted behind the cantle. He loped back to where Lieutenant Castle and the troops had gathered at the base of the ridge, to stand goggling at dead and wounded Indians strewn all along the little meadow.

"Fifty-odd killed and crippled, Billy!" Sergeant Duckworth whooped joyously. "For rookies, these lads done fine. But you got the big prize, I see."

"The big prize?" Lieutenant Castle blinked as Billy rode up, let the senseless Indian slide to the ground.

"Blue Sky, himself, Lieutenant," Billy said drily.

"Blue Sky!" the shavetail gasped.

"Hogtie him before he gets his wits back," Billy said. "Turn Blue Sky over to Colonel Drake, and the killin' cuss will be tried and hanged."

"But all those Indians who got away!" the lieutenant said uneasily. "They'll attack us and try to rescue their chief, won't they?"

"You won't have to worry about an attack," Billy said gravely. "I'll palaver with some of that wounded bunch yore troopers are guardin' yonder, Lieutenant. We'll let one of the cripples go, and have him tell the warwhoops who ran away that Blue Sky is yore prisoner, and will be killed the moment they come near yore outfit."

THE sergeant reassured the uneasy shavetail. "That'll do it, sir. Give them Injuns the notion their chief would be butchered if they bothered us, and we'll have no troubles with the devils."

"Thank heavens this buckskin man, Billy Bates, took a pasear down here hunting us!" the lieutenant said gravely. "We'd have been dead ducks, Al, if Billy hadn't been here to help us. If only Captain Todd had not lost his life, I'd say we had cause to celebrate, for only seven of our men are wounded, and only two of those will need to ride the ambulance."

"We'll have to get the captain's remains, and bury him before we head back to Arkansas," the sergeant said. "Billy, will yuh show us where to find the body?"

"Soon as I palaver with one of those wounded bucks, and he's been freed, you and the lieutenant get the troops and yore prisoners back to camp," Billy drawled. "By the time yuh get the mules hitched to your wagons and the ambulance, I'll be there with the captain's 'body.' Only I doubt if you men would be mean enough to bury him, for he'll be about the liveliest, and maddest, corpse yuh've ever seen!"

Before either the lieutenant or the sergeant could begin questioning him, Billy rode out to where the wounded Indians were under guard, picked out a lanky young Arapaho buck, and began talking rapidly to the Indian in his own tongue. The Indian nodded gravely, glancing toward Blue Sky who was being securely bound by a couple of troopers.

"Let this one go, boys," Billy told the guards. "He's to take a message to the rest of his scalp-huntin' outfit."

The Indian stood up, wincing a little from a raw wound in his naked thigh. But when Billy told him to go, he went limping away, heading toward a bunch of ponies grazing along the canyon floor.

"Now, Bates!" Lieutenant Castle shrilled, striding up. "What's this about you claiming that Captain Todd was dead, then changing the story?"

Sergeant Duckworth was there, too. But the sergeant was grinning faintly, shrewd eyes studying Billy narrowly. Billy smiled wryly, and told them what had happened, and why Captain Todd had not shown up to take command.

"But don't let it fret yuh," Billy finished. "Todd will be fumin', of course, when I get back to him. But if I peg the gander right, he'll simmer down fast enough when he finds out he really will be able to turn Blue Sky in for hangin', after all."

"If you show up minus yore scalp, Billy, we'll know who snatched it, anyhow!" Sergeant Duckworth chuckled as Billy Bates turned his horse and went loping away.

The Whang Leather

CHAPTER I

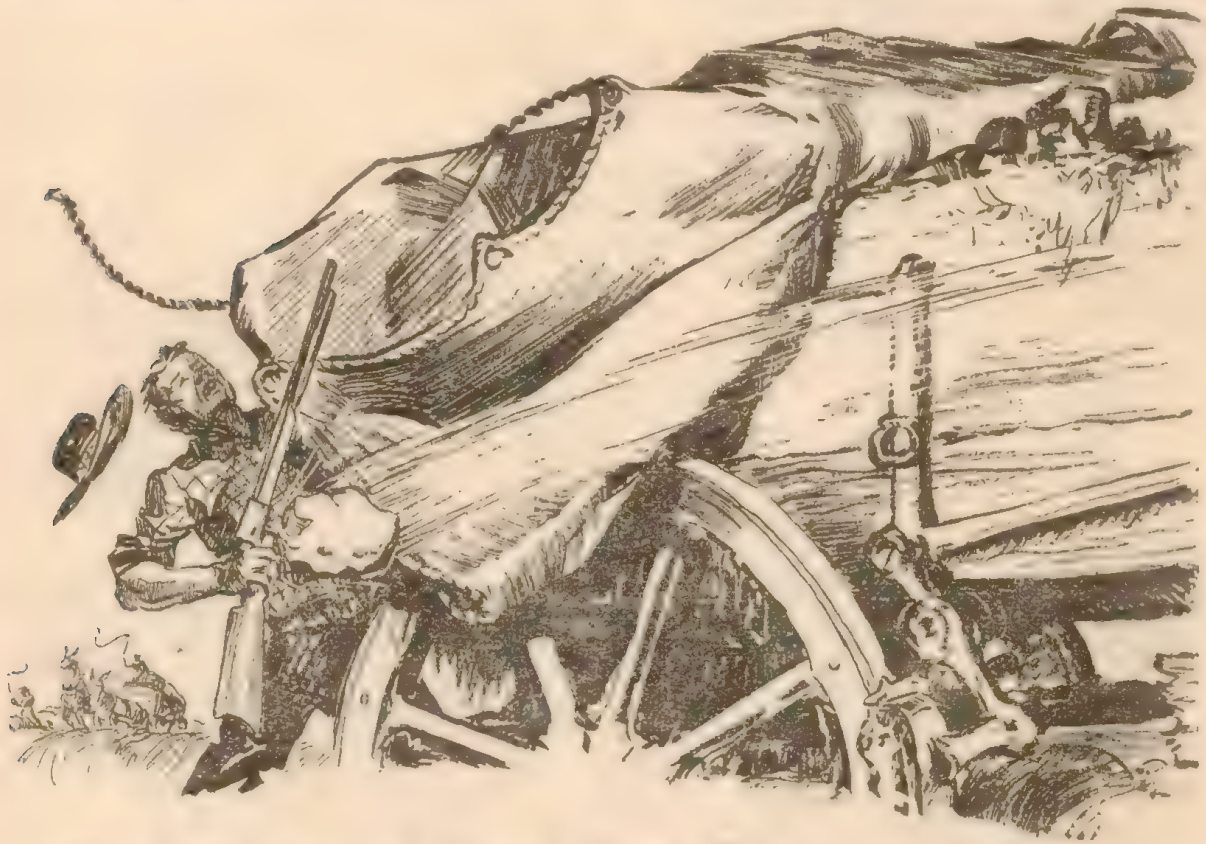
Stubby Stroud Returns

NEWS TRAVELED like the wind in borderland country. The news that a railroad was coming through Painted Post hit the small, isolated cowtown with the suddenness of a desert dust storm. By nightfall, Thimble Jack's Saloon buzzed with boom talk. Ranchers from miles around had gathered there, like tumbleweeds in a fence corner.

Judge John Bertram headed the powwow. The big news meant more to him than anybody else, because his T Bar T was the biggest spread in Indian County. A new railroad, coming sixty miles down from the Southern Pacific main line at Cottonwood, would be bound to cross his range.

Bertram was a silvery-haired old-timer with a square, ruddy face and a bullfrog voice. He stood at the center of the bar, hemmed in by the excited crowd that hung goggle-eyed on every word he uttered.

"Our pioneer days are over, boys!" he boomed. "From now on, it's progress an' prosperity for everybody! Painted Post is



Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts didn't know very much about building a railroad, but they certainly knew the way to lay a track to a nest of range crooks and schemers!

Kid

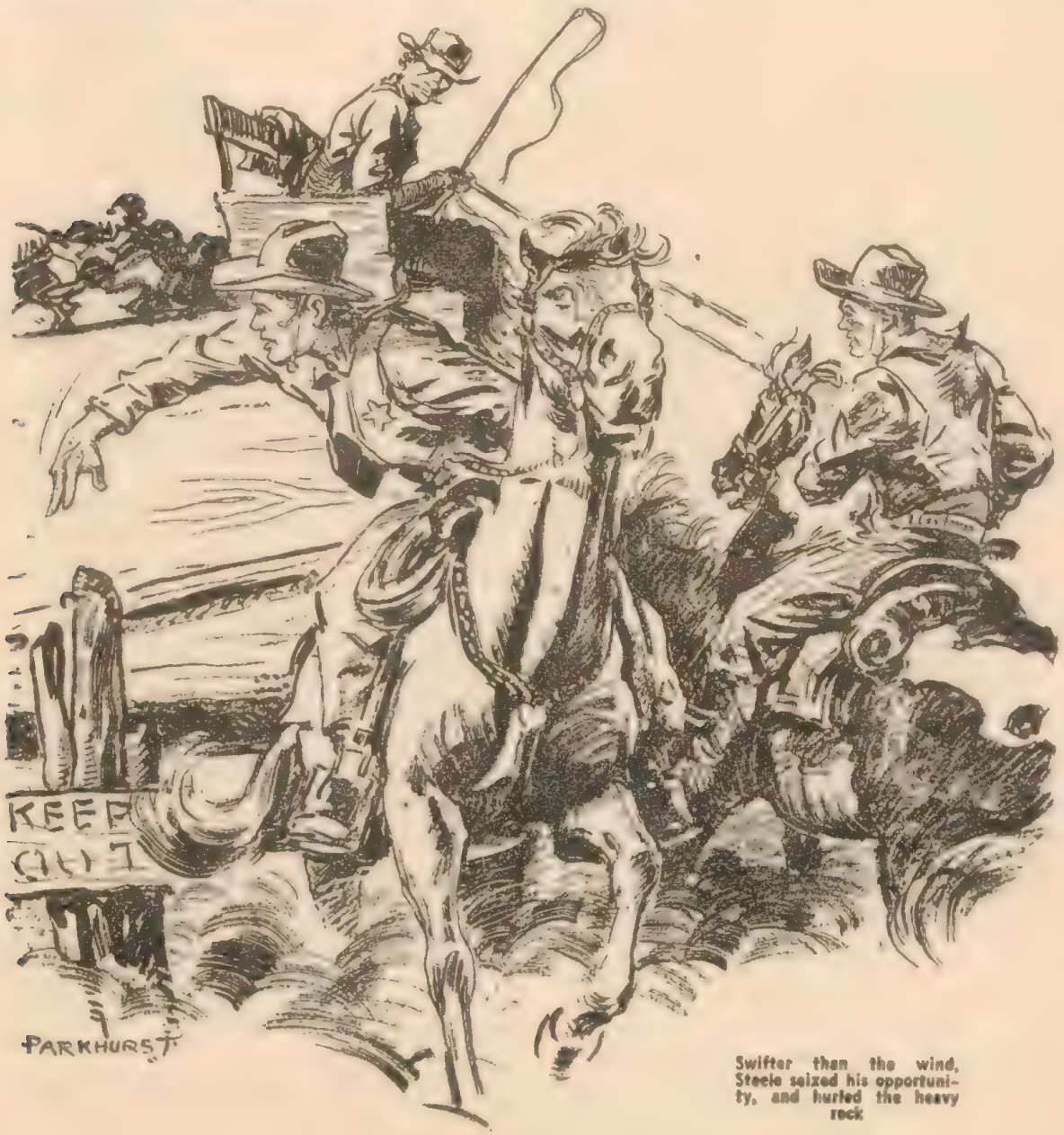
a Painted Post novelet by TOM GUNN

on the map at last—or mighty soon will be. Watch us grow!"

Clay Ashby, a glum, moon-faced man who was having a losing struggle with the small, unprofitable Circle 7, was a latecomer to the celebration.

"Tell me, Judge, is this here announcement official?" he demanded.

"No, not exactly, Clay. Sort o' premature, it is. But thunderation, it ain't usual for railroads to announce their plans beforehand!"



Swifter than the wind, Steele seized his opportunity, and hurled the heavy rock

"Then this is just another paper railroad, huh?"

"Good Godfrey, no!" Bertram rumbled positively. "There's a survey party at work already."

"Yeah? Where?"

JUDGE BERTRAM braced his broad back to the bar and aimed a finger at an undersized, aging man who had just lugged a case of bottled goods in from the back room.

"Tell 'em again, Dictionary," he ordered.

"Dictionary" Smith, the town handyman, hoisted the liquor onto the back end of the bar, wiped his hands on his pants legs, and faced the crowd's eager stares shyly.

"It—it's sort o' confidential, Judge," he faltered.

"Never mind that! Tell Clay, here, what you heard—and saw!"

"Well, then," said Dictionary, as he got his breath, "when I ain't weighted with responsibilities, such as now, it's a habit of mine to explorate around on foot. It'd surprise you, the unusual things a man comes onto just pokin' around. One day I saw—"

"Tell what you seen today," barked Bertram.

"Sure, Judge, sure," Dictionary rattled off obediently. "Today I perambulated over to Hourglass Canyon. Climbed to a high ridge to enjoy the scenery. Sometime, when the light an' shadow falls just right, I'm ambitious to make a painting o' that view. You can look for miles down into Mexico and—"

"And you saw some men at work, about where the Arizona boundary crosses that alkali flat," Bertram reminded him impatiently.

"Yup, that's right," nodded Dictionary. "Six-seven men and a pack train loaded with transits and other surveyin' gear. Down on what's called Frying Pan Sink. Appeared to be stakin' out a survey, straight down across the Border. For quite a spell, I watched 'em. Come noontime, they stopped and made for the canyon. I observed, then, that they had a camp there by that waterhole where the Hourglass opens into the Sink. So I moseyed down there and met up with 'em. All but one, that is, who took off just as I showed up."

"And they let on as how they were making a railroad survey?" asked Clay Ashby. "Did they come right out and tell you that?"

"After some sociable preliminaries," said Dictionary, running a hand with fond reminiscence across his mouth and eying the case of bar goods. "Funny, ain't it, what a big difference there is between one brand o' tarantula juice and another? Finally, the boss of the survey outfit, he up and confided that the A & M is going to be rushed through, pronto. Soon as a grading crew can start."

Clay Ashby screwed up one eye skeptically.

"Mebbe you were seven-eighths drunk and heard wrong. Anybody else get wind of this?" he inquired, flinging a challenging look around him.

A stooped, tired-looking man, with ragged whiskers and out-at-the-elbow shirt, surprised Ashby with an affirmative answer.

"Reckon Ah did, Clay," he drawled. "Them gents, they bought four pack mules offen me, just two days back. Though they didn't allow as how they aimed to use 'em, or where. And Ah didn't ask."

The speaker, "Jackass" Stroud, was a familiar character in the Painted Post country. A migrant from Missouri, he had come a few years before, and with Bertram's help had started a mule ranch on Squaw Creek, where T Bar T's east boundary met Rancho Robles.

Stroud hadn't done too well. But he had scraped together enough means to send his boy to school up Phoenix way.

"Stubby" Stroud was a freckled twelve-year-old when he went away, small for his age but husky and active. The elder Stroud was very lonely without the youngster. But he clung stubbornly to the determination that Stubby would have the education that he, himself, sorely lacked.

"Iffen Stubby'd been around," Stroud added pensively, "he'd have pumped them strangers, and found out what they was up to. But me, Ah ain't so curious-minded thataway."

"It could be they weren't the same men that Dictionary claims he saw," argued Clay Ashby.

"That pack string consisted of four

mules," stated Dictionary. "They were Stroud shavetails, all right enough. Had his Snake Track brand on 'em."

"You see, Clay?" beamed Bertram. "The railroad's a-comin', sure as shootin'! We won't be at the tip end of nowhere, not much longer. Connected with civilization by a rattletrap stage line, as we have been!"

At this unflattering description of his regular twice-a-week mail, passenger and freight service between Cottonwood and Painted Post, "Magpie" Stevens bristled. The grizzled, gap-toothed stage driver was a little put out, anyhow, that he had not been first with the news. He was a gabby old gossip.

"Any dad-blamed railroad would be bound tuh foller the stage route," he huffed. "And I kin swear there ain't been no sign of survey work anywhere along the road. Dictionary seen a mirage, the chances are."

"What that boss surveyor had in a quart flask wasn't any optical illusion," quipped the little handyman.

JUDGE BERTRAM wheeled around, a tall man in a spotted calfskin vest who stood at the far end of the bar, his rugged, sun-bronzed face shadowed by wide-brimmed Stetson.

"You haven't put in your say-so yet, Sheriff," he said. "How about it? Haven't we got good reason to celebrate?"

Sheriff Blue Steele had put Painted Post on the map, though in a different way than a connecting railroad. The famous two-gun lawman and his loyal, red-headed deputy, "Shorty" Watts, who stood beside him, had brought peace and order, such as there was, to the Border country.

As Steele deliberated, Shorty bobbed up as usual with a quick answer.

"Glory be, yes!" he chirped. "Plenty o' reason, I'd say!"

"What d'you know about railroads, you half-made ignoramus?" g r u n t e d Clay Ashby.

"Me?" flared Shorty. "I rode clean tuh Omaha once, on a cattle train!"

Steele spoke up then, more to nip a budding argument than to express an opinion.

"You'll soon know, Judge, whether this railroad talk is fact or rumor—when they ask you for right-of-way across T Bar T."

Bertram's frosty brows puckered with a trace of uncertainty. It did seem strange that he hadn't been approached yet, in such a matter.

"I'll make a looksee down Hourglass way in the morning," Steele finished.

The confab broke up along towards midnight. Steele and Shorty went up the street to their sleeping quarters in the jail office. Scratching a sulphur-tipped match under the edge of his desk, the sheriff lifted the tiny flame to the wall-reflector lamp above it.

The wick took hold as he replaced the lamp chimney, filling the whitewashed place with light. Steele's hand dropped swiftly to his right-hand Colt. But he didn't draw as his gray, slitted eyes riveted on a waiting visitor.

"Stubby!" he exclaimed. "S t u b b y Stroud!"

The nickname hardly fit the wiry young six-footer who sprang to his feet from Shorty's cot, back by the cell bars. With a sleepy grin, he rushed with a long-armed grab at the two of them.

"Sheriff!" he cried delightedly. "And good ol' Shorty Watts! Gosh, I thought you'd never show up!"

His grin faded, then.

"I'm not Stubby, not anymore, Sheriff," he said. "The 'Whang Leather Kid,' that's what they call me now."

He stepped to the door and toed it shut, for homebound ranchers were riding past along the dark street.

"There's something I've plumb got to tell you," he announced in a low, troubled voice. "Something just among the three of us."

In the few years that he had been away, Jackass Stroud's youngster had changed so much that it was a wonder that Steele had recognized him. Though a teener still, he was no longer a youngster in looks. As tall as the sheriff himself, as freckle-s p a t t e r e d and red-haired as Shorty, he bore a resemblance to both of them.

This was not so remarkable, in a sense, because the boy had idolized Steele and Shorty and had patterned himself after them.

And now young Stroud was back.

"This shore is good news for yore dad, button!" gabbled Shorty.

"How come he didn't say you were

back, son?" asked Steele.

The Whang-Leather Kid flung a lank leg over a corner of the sheriff's desk and swallowed a lump in his throat.

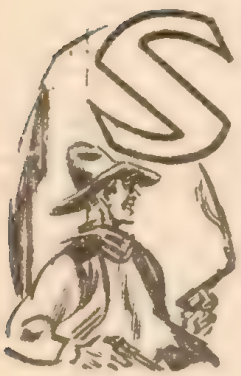
"Because he doesn't know I'm here, Sheriff," he said in a husky undertone. "Pop thinks I'm still schooling up at Phoenix. That's what I want to talk to you about."

There was a moment of grim-lipped silence. Then Steele settled in his desk chair and groped for cigarette makings.

"Let's have it," he said in a brittle voice.

CHAPTER II

Boulder Benton



TUBBY STROUD—the Whang Leather Kid—swung a dangling leg restlessly and avoided meeting Steele's granite gaze.

"You know better than anybody what a struggle it's been for Pop to send me to school," he began. "He sets a store in book learning, like folks do that never had any. I just can't go on, taking every dollar he can scrape up. I told Boulder Benton about it."

"Who," asked Steele, slowly twisting a smoke shut, "is Boulder Benton?"

"Oh, a fellow I got to know in Phoenix," was the vague answer. "Right now, he's my boss."

"What's his business?"

"That isn't easy to say, Sheriff. Anyhow, he gave me a job. I'm carrying chain for a survey gang."

"Migosh!" ripped out Shorty. "Over in Hourglass Canyon, for that railroad outfit?"

Young Stroud swallowed hard again, eyes lowering to the tip of his swinging boot.

"What I came here to tell you," he admitted, "is that there isn't going to be any railroad. The A & M is only hot air."

"B-but Dictionary said—"

"I know," the youth blurted. "I saw Dictionary down at the canyon camp today and ducked out, not wanting him or anybody else I know to see me. Yes, and I heard what Benton told him. That's part of Benton's game, to get the railroad rumor started."

"Just what," Steele demanded, "*is* Benton's game?"

"Sheriff, I don't know."

The youngster's frank, blue eyes met Steele's squarely when he said that.

"It's not on the level, you know that much, don't you?"

The Stroud boy squirmed. "He's not up to anything unlawful, so far's I know."

"Just how do you fit in this fake setup?" Steele asked sternly.

Stung by the rebuke in the sheriff's voice, young Stroud sprang to his feet.

"I've got to help Pop, and this was my chance!" he cried in a tortured voice. "Boulder Benton is bringing in a construction crew. They're going to build an earth-fill roadway across Frying Pan Sink, high enough so's it won't be under water when that flat turns into a lake, like it does in a wet season. He'll need mules for that work, lots o' mules. He'll buy 'em from Pop. And that's how it is. I—I just didn't want you and Shorty to be fooled by what's going on, see?"

The cigarette dangled unlit from Steele's compressed lips. He ran a hand along his cartridge-filled *buscadero* belt. All the pleasure he had felt from seeing Stubby Stroud again had gone.

"Son," he declared finally, "you've got to get out of it. Before you're in too deep."

The other's shoulders squared defiantly. He paled, so that his gingersnap freckles stood out plain in the lamplight.

"I'm plumb sorry, Sheriff," he breathed. "I—I was hopin' you'd understand."

"The Sheriff understands plenty, button!" gritted Shorty. "You'd better quit that shady hombre, sudden! By the way, how come you call yourself the Whang Leather Kid?"

"Boulder Benton wished that nickname onto me," Stubby said. "I had a little mixup after school one day with a gang of bullies. Benton saw me put 'em on the run. That's how it started. . . Well, I'd better get along back to camp. What I've told you is confidential. That's understood, isn't it, Sheriff?"

Steele tossed the unsmoked cigarette to the floor and got to his feet, so that they faced one another across the desk.

"No, son," he said somberly. "I can't

promise that."

"You know what it means if you interfere with Boulder Benton?" Stubby cried with a flash of temper. "It means that the mule deal will fall through! And that Pop, with more mules that he can feed or sell, will go bust!"

"I've got a sworn duty," Steele told him, "and that duty isn't just to your Dad and Snake Track, but to every citizen and outfit in Indian County."

Shorty stepped to the door as young Stroud moved toward it.

"Cool down, button," the deputy said. "Better stay here with us t'night," he urged.

Angrily, the lean, hard-muscled boy thrust him aside and flung the door open.

"I thought the two of you were my friends!" he exploded. "Well, I was wrong! So I'm sticking with the one real friend I've got—Boulder Benton!"

"Hold on, yuh mule-headed brat!" yelped Shorty, seizing the other's arm. "Yuh're headed for trouble, sure!"

YOUNG Stroud shook off his hold roughly. Whatever "Boulder" Benton was up to, he was right in naming this fiery young redhead. Every sinew in him was as tough as rawhide thongs.

He rushed up the street to the pole-sided feed corral. A moment later, they heard him ride off at rash speed into the night.

Shorty came back in, let out a despairing sigh. He stole a sad look at Steele. In all their long time together, he had never seen the sheriff look so stricken. He managed most always to mask his feelings. But not now. His hand still played over the cartridges in his gun belt. His rugged face was haggard with worry. He flicked a mirthless, one-sided smile at the little deputy.

"Y'know, *segundo,*" he said, heavy-voiced, "it doesn't seem any time at all since he was a little shaver. And we taught him to ride and shoot."

"And even learnt him tuh read and write and figger, some."

"Looks as though it's up to us, now, to put the finishing touches on Stubby Stroud's education. It's going to be a hard lesson. Hard on us all."

"The lesson that leggy colt needs is a whang leather strap laid across the seat of his breeches!" sputtered Shorty.

"Why didn't you tackle the job, *segundo?*"

"Trouble is," Shorty muttered ruefully, "he's sort of outgrowed me. Say, when this railroad dream blows up, it'll be a jolt for Judge Bertram and the rest o' them hopefuls, won't it, Sheriff?"

Steele shrugged one shoulder as he answered his deputy.

"And nobody'll thank us for opening their eyes. Least of all, Old Man Stroud."

With that, the two law men prepared for bed.

Steele and Shorty rode at sunup for the Hourglass. It was less than an hour's ride from town to the canyon. The early, slanting sun made the lava-walled gash in the desert look even more rugged and forbidding than it was. The canyon was a gigantic flue, narrowing at its outlet onto Frying Pan Sink to a gap, through which the winds of centuries had carried marching dunes of fine-blown sand to the alkali flat beyond.

The survey camp was astir when they arrived. A knot of men were at breakfast around an open campfire. Steele quickly spotted young Stroud. It was almost as easy to identify the leader of the party, Boulder Benton.

Chesty and spraddle-legged, he stood and faced the two riders, not belligerently, but with a confident, mocking smile. He was a thick-shouldered, vigorous man with a magnetic force of character that shone in his dark eyes and bold-featured face. He wore a six-gun holstered butt forward against his left thigh and a black, flat-crowned hat cocked at a jaunty angle. His eyes traveled appreciatively over the sheriff's well-groomed steeldust gelding and Shorty's flashy pinto.

"Howdy, neighbors," he called out, making a gracious sweep of one hand towards the breakfast fire. "Light and pitch in."

The Stroud youngster, Steele noticed, sat with back obstinately turned to them. Steele stepped down from the gelding. The rest of the men busily concentrated their attention on food, but with a tenseness that hinted at uneasiness.

"Thanks, Benton. But this isn't a breakfast ride," Steele responded. "Our interest runs to railroad talk just now."

"So that old geezer talked, eh?"

"Didn't you figure he would?"

"Well, he saw what we're doing. No use denying it, then."

"Let's get down to brass tacks, Benton. What's behind this scheme?"

The badge on Steele's calfskin vest held Benton's eyes as he replied:

"Is it the law in this corner of the Territory that a man has to explain his business to whoever comes along?"

"When his business concerns everybody, yes," Steele answered. " 'Specially, when he spreads talk he can't back up with facts."

Benton's smile turned frosty.

"Let me tell you something, brother," he said with a sharp-edged voice. "When big corporations go to spend important money, they don't ask the permission of an out-of-the-way cow county sheriff!"

His look shot past Steele, then, at a group of approaching riders.

"Hullo! Folks get around early in these parts, don't they?"

Steele turned at the sound of approaching hoofs. Judge Bertram on his moon-gray, accompanied by several others, including Jackass Stroud, rode up. Benton raised a hand, greeting them jovially.

"Glad you're in on this, gents. Your sheriff, here, he's made us feel unwelcome."

BERTRAM reined up with a searching look at Steele's face.

"How come?" he rumbled.

"He's dead set against progress, it seems like," Benton said. "Hope the rest o' you aren't opposed to railroad development."

"Thunderation, no!" whooped Bertram, turning turkey-red. "What's the play, Sheriff?"

Benton was quick to widen the breach.

"There are other routes into Mexico that don't touch Indian County, at all," he said. "And where everybody'd give their eye teeth to see the A & M come in."

Bertram's jowls shook with anger. He glared at Steele.

He was about to blow up when Shorty chipped in.

"Don't go off half-cocked, Judge. Me and the sheriff, we got it on purty good authority that this windy hombre don't represent nobody but himself."

"What authority?" blared Bertram. "Name it! Go ahead, name it!"

The little deputy stabbed an accusing finger at the hunched shoulders of young Stroud.

"Don't hide in that tincup, Stubby. Stand up like a man! Face yore Pop and yore old friends! Put 'em straight! Tell 'em the truth, like yuh told me and the sheriff last night at the jail office!"

SHORTY'S crackling challenge struck the scattered group like forked lightning, and on each the effect was different. Boulder Benton, his suavity gone, uttered a smothered oath. His men muttered menacingly at the squatted youth. Judge Bertram's jowls hung slack from his gaping jaws.

Then the Stroud stripling hurled his half-empty coffee cup clattering to the rocks and leaped furiously to his feet. Old Jackass Stroud, with an inarticulate cry of delight, slid from saddle and rushed at his son with open arms.

But Stubby Stroud had eyes for nobody but Shorty. His freckles were red-hot pennies on his ghost-white face. Lips flat across his clenched teeth, he spat out his scorn and hate.

"You dirty, ignorant, double-crossing little sidewinder!" he stormed. "You're not fit to breathe! You're no man, you're a low-down polecat, and I—"

That did it.

Shorty peeled out of leather before he could finish, unbuckled his gun belt and flung it to the ground.

"That settles it, yuh ornery, overgrown brat!" he snapped. "Here's where yuh learn a lesson they left out o' them fancy school books!"

There was no stopping them. They rushed at each other and collided with a force that sent both of them reeling. As quickly, they attacked again.

They were a strangely-matched pair. Limber and swift, like a rawhide snapper on a whip, young Stroud towered over the little deputy's five-feet-two. He had reach and speed and power that had Shorty weaving and ducking and side-stepping, but not fast enough to dodge all those vicious swings.

Shorty took hard punishment, and it was soon apparent to the stunned onlookers that he didn't land a blow. Either he was too busy guarding, or else he was not trying to hit back. They milled in a wide

circle, Stroud the savage aggressor, boring in every second but failing to strike a solid, finishing blow, his fury mounting with the little redhead's elusiveness.

It was a pace that couldn't last. The Stroud youth, quick and powerful though he was, lacked the endurance of maturity. His wallops weakened. He grew unsteady and stumbled on the rough ground. His breath came in hoarse gasps. Presently the tables turned and he was on the defensive, struggling desperately to keep Shorty away from him. The youngster was backing away now.

Shorty hooked in and they clinched. Stroud twisted and broke away. Shorty rushed while he was still off-balance, clamping an elbow around the young one's neck, clinging there with all his weight.

He threshed and dangled, bending the half-strangled youth whose strength was waning with each tortured breath. He endured wicked jabs to the head and body without slackening his hold.

FINALLY, like wet weather, Stroud wilted. He dropped to his knees. Suddenly, then, Shorty was all over him. His short legs, with sinews hardened by a lifetime in saddle, closed in a crunching scissors'-hold around the lean youngster's middle. His hands were busy at the heavy, concha-studded belt that Stroud wore. He unbuckled and jerked it off.

He held the exhausted, feebly-struggling, man-sized boy face down and upended. He lashed down with the buckle end. Stubby Stroud choked back an agonized cry. One bruising, blistering larrup followed another until the pain was more than flesh could endure. The beaten youngster gave all the breath that was left in him to one anguished groan of defeat.

"Let up!" he croaked. "Th-that's enough, let up!"

"Just one more spank, sonny boy!" panted Shorty. "This last black mark is tuh correct yore bad manners!"

With a final wallop, Shorty let go the belt and unclamped himself, springing nimbly to his feet.

"School's out, Stubby!" he chirped. "Git up now, and go to yore pop! Because yuh're out of a job with Mister Boulder Benton!"

CHAPTER III

Within the Law

BOULDER BENTON shrewdly saw that the fight had put Steele at a further disadvantage. Already he had the dominating influence of Judge Bertram on his side. The one threat to his enterprise was in what young Stroud might say.

But whatever the lad had told Steele and Shorty, there was no present danger that he would repeat it. For he was slogging out of camp afoot, up the Hourglass. The elder Stroud called out imploringly, then mounted and followed.

"Now," Benton spoke up, his poise returning, "if the sheriff and his showoff sidekick have settled their private squabble, let's get back to the business that brought the rest of you here. I'll start by saying that this is open, government land—public domain. I have legal right to survey it and to move dirt."

"Then you plan to go ahead with the work?" Judge Bertram asked eagerly.

"As soon as I can bring in a construction crew. And work teams. Not Stroud mules, however."

Clay Ashby was one of the Bertram party, and he still had lingering doubts.

"Tell me," he said to Benton, "how come you start the job way down here, at this end?"

"That's a good question, neighbor," Benton said agreeably. "Suppose a wet year came along and filled up the dry lake below here, the part known as Frying Pan Sink."

"That has happened, by Godfrey," asserted Bertram.

"It might take weeks to dry—during which, grading operations would be held up. So that's why I'm starting here, making a rock fill across those alkali bottoms while they're dry."

"Thunderation, that's only good sense!" declared Bertram.

"Yeah, I reckon so," admitted Ashby. "Just one thing more. When is this Ari-

zona & Mexico Railroad to be finished?"

"That depends on whatever delays I might encounter," Benton said glibly. "Such as what happened here this morning, while your meddlesome law-enforcement officials rampaged."

"I guarantee you won't be troubled anymore by them!" vowed the judge. "We are property owners and the main ones concerned, and we're in back of you. Isn't that right, boys?"

There was a chorus of assent. Even Clay Ashby joined in. Benton shot a triumphant look at Steele, and said:

"That settles it. And now to make up for lost time."

He turned and started giving brisk orders to his men. Bertram and his companions reined around and started back for town.

Steele and Shorty withdrew, too, but not with them.

"The judge didn't even ask for yore side of it!" Shorty sputtered indignantly. "He handed you a public spankin' like I did Stubby, that's about what it amounts to!"

If Steele felt any resentment at Bertram's belittling, he managed to conceal it.

"He's boom-blind, *segundo*. A railroad to Painted Post would make him a rich man. Money talks."

"Money! That's everybody's main concern. Come to think about it, how is Benton goin' tuh make money by foolin' folks intuh thinkin' he's buildin' a railroad?"

"That," Steele said thoughtfully, "is what we've got to find out, *segundo*."

"All we've got tuh go on is what Stubby told us. Yuh figger, by any chance, that Benson *is* on the level?"

They had mounted to the canyon rim. Steele's answer was to rein up the gelding, turn and point to the panorama of empty desert to the south. It was a waterless wilderness of barren mesas and brushy plateaus, with a looming mountain barrier beyond.

"It'd take millions to push a route through there to populated parts of Mexico, and years to finish it," he said. "There are better routes, to the west and east. What is down there to attract a railroad?"

"Not much," Shorty Watts said. "Silver an' gold, according tuh accounts. But the Mexican guv'ment close-herds that."

Steele's granite-gray eyes swerved sharply to the little deputy. He looped the reins over his saddle-horn and reached meditatively for cigarette makings.

"*Segundo*," he said finally, "I think you made a bull's-eye."

Shorty's slightly battered face registered vague surprise.

"Me?" he gusted. "How? I don't savvy!"

A thin smile flicked Steele's lips.

"Sometimes," he said mysteriously, "you say bright things without knowing it."

"Huh! I'm intelligent by accident, is that it?" Shorty sputtered. "I still don't savvy what I said that's so danged smart. Yuh mind pointin' out what it was?"

Steele cupped a sputtering match in his hands.

"It might go to your head, *segundo*. I'd sort of hate to spoil you with conceit. C'mon, let's tend to more urgent business."

"Meanin' what?"

"We left town before Chow Now was up, remember?"

Shorty's interest switched immediately to food.

"Yuh did stretch the truth some when yuh let on tuh Benton as how we'd ate breakfast already!" he said, touching spur to the pinto. "Migosh, I'm emptier'n a leaky bucket!"

THEY reached town just as Magpie Stevens' stage was pulling out, a little behind schedule, on its regular twice-weekly up-trip to Cottonwood. Magpie paused to wave and hail them.

"Been hearin' the judge palaver railroad," the old stage driver jabbered enthusiastically. "It's the real thing, he says. That's mighty fine news, ain't it?"

"It'd put you and yore pepper shaker in the discard," said Shorty. "Plumb permanent."

Magpie spurted tobacco juice from his perch on top of the rattly old Concord coach.

"What of it? I kin make a stake haulin' supplies for the construction outfit!" he rattled off.

He cracked his long whip over the leaders' ears and was off in a swirl of dust.

"Money talking again," Steele remarked.

They found Chow Now's place filled with the crowd they had parted with at Benton's camp. The small, smoky eatery was abuzz with talk. A chill fell over the group as Steele entered, with Shorty at his heels.

Judge Bertram concentrated his attention on a platter of ham and eggs. Clay Ashby swung around on his counter stool and broke the awkward pause.

"Some things is better left unsaid," he spoke up. "But there's just one question still surgin' around in my system, Sheriff. That is, how come young Stroud was down yonder unbeknownst to his old man? Also, what did he tell you and the *segundo* that led to the scrap between 'em?"

"That's two questions, Clay," parried Steele.

"All right, then it is. How about it?"

Steele long-leggedly straddled a seat as he gave his answer:

"The answer to the first one is that the youngster quit school to earn some money."

"Looks tuh me like you and Shorty pried him loose from that opportunity," growled the judge, addressing the ham and eggs.

"Now how about an answer to Question Number Two," said Ashby, with quiet insistence. "What did the Stroud kid say?"

That was the query Steele wanted to avoid answering. Of course, he had not committed himself to secrecy. If he repeated what Stubby had told him and Shorty—that Benton was out for himself only; that the railroad was only "hot air"—it would square him with Judge Bertram and the others.

But he could not bring himself to do it. Stubby had trusted him. To violate that trust now would estrange him forever in the boy's eyes. All of this went through his mind before he replied:

"Sorry, Clay, but that's confidential."

Clay Ashby's face stiffened. He was about to utter some sharp retort when Bertram broke in again with his lambasting:

"Also, that fool ruckus down there cost Old Man Stroud a chance to sell mules and put the Snake Track on its feet. I've heard complaints in times past that a certain sheriff has gone badge-heavy. I'm beginnin' to think so my ownself."

Steele no longer could endure that persistent nagging. In the silence that followed, a silence as thick as the smoke in the crowded café, he reached to his calfskin vest front. He plucked off the battered silver star that he had worn so long and so honorably. It slid along the counter and stopped beside Judge Bertram's ham and eggs, squarely under his glowering eyes.

Bertram's wide mouth opened and closed several times in resemblance to an expiring catfish.

By the open doorway, loitering over an after-breakfast cheroot, stood Judge Bertram's old crony—peppery, outspoken Doc Crabtree. The Doc's specs flashed reprovingly on his abashed friend.

"You're called, John," he said. "Now what?"

Bertram's silently moving lips finally stilled. He had no comeback.

Doc Crabtree drew the cheroot from his mouth and lit in to him then.

"No other man in Arizona Territory could, or would, do what Blue Steele has done to clean up the Border, to make life and property safe for you and others in Indian County. You know that, you cussed old coot! Sure, the sheriff owes his job to you! But you and everybody here owes him about everything they've got, or hope to have! You're holding a losing hand, John. Better toss it in the discard!"

Hardly anybody except sharp-tongued Doc Crabtree would have dared to lash the judge like that. He took it. He laid down his knife and fork, pushed the unfinished breakfast away from him. He put the sheriff's badge in his broad palm and shoved to his feet.

THE SUSPENSE was terrific as Judge Bertram tramped past the line of stools, limping a little on the leg that once had stopped a rustler's bullet. He came to a stop behind Steele.

Deliberately, he reached across Steele's shoulder and jabbed the badge back in place. Then his hand slid clumsily away and gripped roughly Steele's shoulder.

"I shoot off my bazoo too sudden, sometimes," he said in a thick, blurred voice. "Always did. One o' my unamiable shortcomings."

Then his voice grew, rising from deep inside of him.

"I've got just one closing remark. Listen, you stiffnecked son-of-a-gun! If you ever throw that badge at me again, by thunderation, I'll hook it back into your measly hide so deep that you never will get it off!"

He spun away then. Doc Crabtree glinted with admiring approval through his spectacles. He linked his arm through Bertram's.

"We're getting old and grumpy, John, both of us," he said. "What we need about now is a quick pickup. Come along."

Together, the old friends angled across the dusty street towards Thimble Jack's place. The crowd dared to breathe again. The relief was almost audible. The tension ended with an indignant yelp from Shorty:

"Hey there, Chow Now, yuh grub-spoilin' heathen! Them's my ham and eggs that yuh're burnin' tuh a cinder!"

THERE were two ways of meeting trouble—a quick way and a slow one. Steele had chosen the quick way to reach a showdown with Boulder Benton. But the weight of public opinion had forced him to another method: that of giving a man enough rope, as the saying went, to hang himself.

Benton wasted no time. He soon had a work camp established in the Hourglass—wagons, scrapers, horses and a crew of sweatbacks. There was blasting in the hills beyond Frying Pan Sink, south of the Border, and the distant, thudding explosions were music to Bertram and other boom enthusiasts.

But Painted Post didn't get the flourishing business that had been expected from the camp. Benton's workers spent their pay in Los Pasos, which was a wide-open town, more to their liking and about the same distance in the opposite direction from the scene of operations.

Magpie's haulage didn't pick up much, either. Benton freighted his own supplies, with a string of wagons that were in constant procession back and forth from Cottonwood.

Jackass Stroud showed up at the jail office one evening while Steele was smoking a goodnight cigarette and Shorty tugging off his boots.

"Howdy, boys," he greeted. "Ah just cain't hold off no longer. Though the young un, Ah reckon he'd git his dander up if he knowed I came here beggin' help o' you all."

"Come in and light," invited Steele, getting up from his desk chair and waving the aging man to it. "What's the trouble?"

Stroud slumped to the seat and peeled off his hat with a weary gesture. He had aged a lot since they had seen him last.

"Stubby's gone," he groaned.

"Gone where?"

Stroud wagged his head sorrowfully as he gave answer:

"He gave nary a hint. Been missin' since right soon after—after that whuppin' Shorty gave him."

"Shucks, he went back tuh Phoenix, back tuh school, prob'ly," blurted Shorty.

Stroud shook his head again.

"Mighty unlikely. The young un had some muley notions. Dead sot agin schoolin' of a sudden. That's about all he did say in the short spell he was at home. Warn't hisself, not the spritely boy he used to be. Ah reckoned mebbe he showed up here, givin' you all some notion where—why—"

Stroud's voice cracked and he bowed his head to conceal his anguish. When he got hold of his emotions again, he said:

"Here's the worst part. The Snake Track mortgage is overdue some, and now with all this railroad talk that land might turn out valuable. So McCall, he aims to foreclose on me. But how kin Ah pull out now? Not knowin' what happened to—to my boy?"

Shorty sat with one boot dangling loosely from a foot. He was stabbed with a feeling of remorse.

"Migosh, Sheriff," he gusted huskily. "What I spilled that mornin' at Benton's camp put Stubby in a dangerous fix!"

The hard glint that came to Steele's gray eyes convinced Stubby that Steele shared the ugly suspicion that clutched at his own heart.

That suspicion was that Boulder Benton was responsible for the boy's disappearance. The boy claimed definite knowledge that Benton was, at the least, a fraud. That gave Benton a powerful motive to silence him.

Steele tried to cheer up the grieving man.

"Don't fret yourself, Pop. Any spunky youngster is apt to give his folks a bad time of it, now and then. Most always, such things turn out all right. Leave this to the *segundo* and me. About the Snake Track debt—I'm plenty sorry, old-timer. Maybe McCall can be persuaded to extend your mortgage. I'll tackle that, when he shows up to get me to serve the foreclosure notice."

"Iffen you kin talk that highbinder out o' money, Sheriff, yuh kin talk a piney squirrel down out of a tree in nut season," declared Stroud. "But I'm mighty obliged, all the same. Tell me what you all find out about Stubby, please."

He was soon gone. Shorty's boot dropped to the floor.

"Dang it all!" he fretted. "Why didn't Old Man Stroud tell us sooner? It's a purty cold trail, by now."

CHAPTER IV

The Boom Busters

TORMENTED by bad dreams, Stubby spent a restless night. At the first show of daylight, the sharp scent of cigarette smoke roused him. Steele had the steeldust gelding and the pinto, saddled and ready, in front of the jail office.

"Let's have another looksee down Hourglass Canyon way," the sheriff proposed.

"For why?" mumbled the bleary-eyed little deputy. "It'll sound foolish, askin' Benton, 'Excuse us, Mister, but did you do away with the Whang Leather Kid?' "

"I don't figure to tip our hands that plain, *segundo*."

"Mebbe I better leave you do the talkin', then," Shorty decided, as he crawled out of his cot.

"That," Steele told him, "is the best idea you've had since we were down there last."

"Wh-what idea was that?" blinked Shorty.

A one-shouldered shrug was his only answer.

It was a windy ride. A dust storm was brewing. A red-eyed sun peered over the edge of the world when they sighted Benton's camp. A small tent settlement had mushroomed around the mouth of Hourglass Canyon. Tents, corrals, wagons, an imposing array of other equipment—and dust. Fine, stinging particles of sand, fluttering tent flaps and clouds of powdery alkali, were down on the Frying Pan, where a straight embankment, track-wide, reached up from the Mexican side.

"If Benton's pullin' a bluff, it's a big one," observed Shorty. "Messin' up the scenery thataway costs money."

Steele drop-reined the gelding in a sheltering draw, then bucked the wind to the lava-capped canyon rim that overlooked the camp. There he sat, cross-legged and motionless.

As on their previous visit, the camp was wakening and astir. They saw men scurrying around, heads tilted to the wind gusts. Voices drifted up from the corrals, where teamsters wrangled work stock into harness.

Shorty, clamping his hat on tight, joined Steele on the high vantage point.

"What yuh figger tuh find out from here, Sheriff?" he demanded.

Wagons were starting to roll from the corrals. A few moved south. Others streamed along canyon ruts that led north, linking with the stage road to Cottonwood. These Steele watched intently.

"Anything strike you as odd, *segundo*?" he asked.

"About them supply wagons? Shucks, no!"

"They're heavy-loaded and tarp-covered. Wouldn't you say that supply wagons would head for Cottonwood empty?"

"Migosh, that's right! Now what in creation are they totin' away?"

"That," Steele told him cryptically, "is a question that you've already answered for yourself, *segundo*."

"Riddles don't set well with me, not on a empty stummick!" the little deputy said crossly.

"All right, then. Let's go down and find out what's in those wagons."

"What d'yuh figger tuh find? The remains o' Stubby Stroud?"

The wind plucked Shorty's sarcasm from his lips. Heedless of it, Steele moved to the gelding and stepped to saddle. Shorty tooled the pinto down the rough,

steep slope behind him.

They reached the busy scene unnoticed. But when they came alongside a wagon just starting up-canyon, the driver turned with a sullen scowl.

Steele reached out, unknotting a rope that snugged the tarp cover to the high-sided wagon.

"Hey, you, hands off!" shouted the driver.

The rope slacked. A corner of the tarp lifted in the wind. Steele reached in and pulled out a heavy chunk of rock. He examined it closely, Shorty watching him in puzzled wonder.

Then a harsh, hostile voice blasted out from behind.

"Drop that and skip, you snoopy, sneakin', hellhound!"

Steele and Shorty jerked around in saddle. Shielded in back of the wagon, a little to the other side, Boulder Benton glowered wrath along the barrel of a Winchester braced against a high hind wheel.

Steele calmly hefted the heavy piece of rock. He was calm-faced; but metallic specks shone in his slitted granite eyes as he drawled:

"Get a grip on yourself, Benton, instead of that trigger. We're onto your game at last."

"What of it?" snarled the other. "The law can't stop me!"

"Guess again. Border smuggling isn't a legal occupation."

That accusing phrase touched off a fuse that turned Benton to sizzling fury. He tilted his head for a squinting aim and his forefinger slipped inside the trigger guard.

Shorty's red topknot prickled with alarm under his tightened-down hat.

"Look out, Sheriff!" he shrilled. "He's fixin' tuh shoot!"

MANY a six-gun career had ended just that way, in a momentary lapse of vigilance. Frontier history was full of such instances, both famous and infamous. Lawmen and outlaws, both crashed into oblivion when a treacherous enemy caught them empty-handed and defenseless.

Steele was worse than empty-handed. If he dropped that rock, it would be a warning signal to Benton. In the split-second interval it would take Steele to fang out a Colt, a twitch of the other's finger would blast him into eternity. There was no missing at that point-blank range. And Benton need have no fear of the consequences. With community feeling so strongly on his side, he could depend on a prompt acquittal from the jury.

But human means and murderous intentions did not always decide the outcome of such deadly encounters. Fate sometimes played the top hand.

It was the unseen hand of Fate, at this dramatic moment, that plucked loose the untied wagon tarp and flung it, flapping hard, across Boulder Benton's face.

Swifter than the wind, Steele seized his opportunity. He hurled the heavy rock. It crashed against the Winchester, knocking it from Benton's grasp. With a smothered curse, Benton staggered back, blindly fighting the wind-whipped tarpaulin cloth.

At a touch from Steele's knee, the gelding bounded around the back of the wagon. It brought the two men together just as Benton's face emerged from under the heavy canvas. A well-timed swing of the sheriff's left fist slammed into that hate-twisted face.

Benton landed on his back, ten feet from the wagon, nose flattened into a gory mess. He rolled over slowly and swayed on his hands and knees. Moaning, he managed to get to his feet and lurched to the wagon wheel for support.

The Winchester lay there. It seemed that Benton was unable to see it. His suffering gaze was fixed on his trigger finger. It dangled grotesquely across the broad iron wagon tire. It had been broken in the trigger guard when the gun was battered out of his hands.

"As we were saying," Steele said in an easy voice, as though the interruption had been of minor consequence, "smuggling ore out of Mexico into United States is plumb illegal, Benton. There's a double penalty. The Mexican authorities have a law to fit the offense, too. Maybe you'd like me to tip 'em off, how you've looted a rich gold-and-silver deposit just below the boundary, on the pretense that you were blasting and hauling rock for that fill across Frying Pan Sink. And calling it railroad work."

Boulder Benton made no denial as he twisted a bandanna around his hurt hand, then swabbed his bleeding face with it.

"Or have you seen Mexican prisons?" Steele continued. "If so, you'll prefer the comforts of our Painted Post jail."

Benton's ingenious scheme dawned on Shorty Watts now.

"Migosh, Sheriff, how'd yuh ever guess this slicker's dodge?" the deputy gasped.

"You guessed it, *segundo*. When you mentioned gold and silver as the one profitable attraction down yonder. Remember?"

GRAPPLING with his memory, Shorty saw the wagon driver make a stealthy reach for the tool box beside his seat.

"Drop that hub wrench, yuh dumb sweatback!" he crackled, a hand going to the butt of his holstered .45.

He didn't have to draw. The man dropped the heavy wrench as though it had turned red-hot. He swung half-around to Benton.

"Who gives orders around here?" he growled disgustedly. "How about it, Boss?"

Benton's puffed eyes showed above the red-soaked bandanna he pressed to his face.

He finally managed a barely perceptible wink.

"Go tell the boys to hold work for a short spell," he ordered.

The driver made no move to follow out Benton's order.

"Looks to me like it's held up permanent," he said, with a questioning look at Steele, obviously awaiting his say-so.

"Vamose, small fry," said the sheriff.

The man jumped to the ground and trotted towards the corrals.

"We'd better vamose, too, Sheriff," Shorty said uneasily. "Them work stiffs got their eyes on us. If they hackle up, our trouble is just started."

Steele had worked out a plan to handle the dangerous situation.

"Pile onto this ore wagon, Benton, and head up-canyon," he demanded.

Benton, maneuvering for time, croaked balkily, "What for?"

"When we hit the stage road, we'll make for town. And the lockup. I want this load for evidence that'll convince Judge Bertram. Get going!"

"I ain't in shape to wrangle a team," rebelled Benton.

"You'll be in worse shape if you don't hop up there and grab the jerkline, *muy pronto!*"

THE SHERIFF'S tone compelled obedience. Moving as slowly as he dared. Benton obeyed.

Leaning from saddle, Steele scooped up the fallen Winchester and tossed it to Shorty.

"If he tries any tricks, give him a dose of his own medicine, *segundo*," he directed. "You take that side of the wagon, I'll take this side. Let's go!"

The broad-wheeled, heavily-laden wagon creaked into motion as the six horses strained at the tugs. As it started, a knot of ominous-faced men, including the burly driver, hurried out from the corrals and headed for a position on the road, a few yards ahead.

"Yep, we're in for a argument, all right," yipped Shorty.

"You won't get far!" flared Benton, encouraged by the signs of resistance and his pending rescue.

Steele, abreast of the seat where the other was hunched, snapped back at him:

"Don't crow yet, Benton! Wherever we're going—hell, heaven or Painted Post—we're taking you with us! Don't forget that in the next few minutes!"

A dozen or more hard-looking characters blocked the road now, and others were coming on the run. Several wore six-guns. It would take more than bullets to break through. The force of a powerful personality was better than twin Colts in such an emergency. Steele spurred ahead to the group.

"What do you men want?" he sang out. As he spoke, he pointed to the driver who had roused the resistance. "*You* do the talking, *hombre*."

The man stepped forward, flattered by being nominated as spokesman. He was a powerful brute, but slow-minded—which latter trait was the sheriff's reason for singling him out.

"We aim to hold onto our jobs," he announced.

"And I aim to hold onto your boss."

"No boss, no jobs. Rattle your dew claws, Sheriff. Benton stays, savvy?"

"Your jobs with Benton are finished, whatever happens to him," Steele said. "*I'm* hiring now."

"You?" The driver wavered. "How's that?"

"The boom is busted. I'm picking a crew of you to stay on, to care for the livestock and guard the camp."

The wagon had almost reached the human blockade. If it stopped, there would be a fight.

Steele reined into the group, herding them from the road.

He pointed at one man, then another, and kept doing that until he had indicated half of them.

"You men are hired, on county pay. See to it that not one item is taken from this camp."

He kept talking as he hazed them out of the way of the wagon.

"It's to every man's interest that the equipment is kept here, in order. Make a tally of it, and bring the tally to me. I'll slap a lien on the camp and everything in it, even down to the cook's rolling pin. That's the only way you can get your back pay."

He talked his way through them. The road was open. The wagon passed. Benton took the bandanna from his face, about to make a final appeal to rouse the confused men.

But Steele kept their attention, beating Benton to words.

"Boulder Benton is heading for his last rockpile. At Yuma prison," he said smiling. "While you men rest up and enjoy the blessings of liberty and a healthy climate."

A gust of wind, boring down through the funnel-like Hourglass, engulfed them all in a cloud of dust and sand.

"Climate?" yowled the driver. "This blasted climate of yours would chase out the devil himself!"

"Don't let this breeze faze you, *hombre*. It's only the last blast of hot air from the A & M railroad."

The sheriff left them laughing at that last ironic jest.

"Migosh, Sheriff!" Shorty exclaimed in an awed voice, when they were well into the canyon. "I wish folks who claim yuh're no talker could o' heerd that spiel. Beat anything I ever did hear!"

"It beat bullets, *segundo*, praise be," Steele said gravely and devoutly.

"Only we ain't found out anything yet tuh tell Old Man Stroud," Shorty said.

CHAPTER V

Stubby's Return

IT WAS a slow, long trip to town. It was nearly noon when the ore wagon crawled to a halt at the feed corral, soon to provide proof that Steele had been right from the start about Boulder Benton.

Dictionary Smith, perched on the corral gate, whittling, stared round-eyed at the dejected Benton. He started to spout questions, but Steele cut them short.

"How about you wrangling this team out of harness and into the corral, old-timer?"

The next Dictionary knew, Steele and Shorty were hustling their prisoner towards the jail. He called out after them:

"Somebody waitin' for you gents down there!"

The jail office door was open. They thrust Benton inside, and he was first to see the visitor waiting in the chair behind the sheriff's desk.

"The Whang Leather Kid!" he blared. "You again!"

The lanky youth came to his feet.

"Not anymore, I'm not," he declared. "I'm plain Stubby Stroud again."

He looked past Benton, at the two staring law men.

"I've been an awful fool, fellows," he said meekly. "I'm sorry. I've come to apologize."

With a delighted whoop, Shorty threw his dusty hat at the ceiling and bolted toward him. They collided, almost as fiercely as they had at their last meeting. But in friendship, this time, a devotion that had survived and grown stronger than the anger of that hot fracas at Hourglass Canyon.

When they finished their happy pounding of each other, Steele spoke up.

"We've got good news for Old Man Stroud, after all, *segundo*."

"Good news?" Stubby Stroud asked. "Dad's got about all the good news he can stand, Sheriff."

"Meanin', yuh're back home?" jabbered Shorty.

"Yes, back from Chihuahua City," he told them, slanting a defiant look at Benton. "A man down there is organizing a Mexican mining company. He'd got wind of some rich ore deposits below the Frying Pan."

"Got wind of it?" Benton blatted venomously. "How?"

"News travels fast," Steele said. "The scheme you tackled was bound to spread."

"The kid spread it!" raved Benton. "He sold me out, curse his spangled hide!"

"That's a lie!" Stubby said. "But I did sell something."

He spoke to Steele now with all the eagerness of other days, when he shared all his joys and sorrows with him.

"You know what, Sheriff? That mining outfit needs mules. Big, strong work mules. So I sold every head that we can round up on Snake Track! We'll burn that McCall mortgage mighty soon!"

All the strain of recent days lifted from Steele's weathered face. Stroud's misfortune, more than anything else, had depressed his spirits. A slow smile of profound satisfaction erased the grim, tense lines around his mouth. He reached for cigarette makings.

"Good going, sonny," he said.

"Then—then I'm okay with you again, am I, Sheriff?" the grown-up Stubby asked plaintively.

Steele was twisting a curl of brown paper around dry crumbs of tobacco.

"A mule colt that doesn't kick over the traces now and then isn't much account," he said.

Shorty herded Benton into the cell, slammed the barred door and locked it.

"I got another one o' my bright ideas, Sheriff," he grinned, as he grabbed at Stubby and Steele and headed them for the street. "Let's all go eat!"

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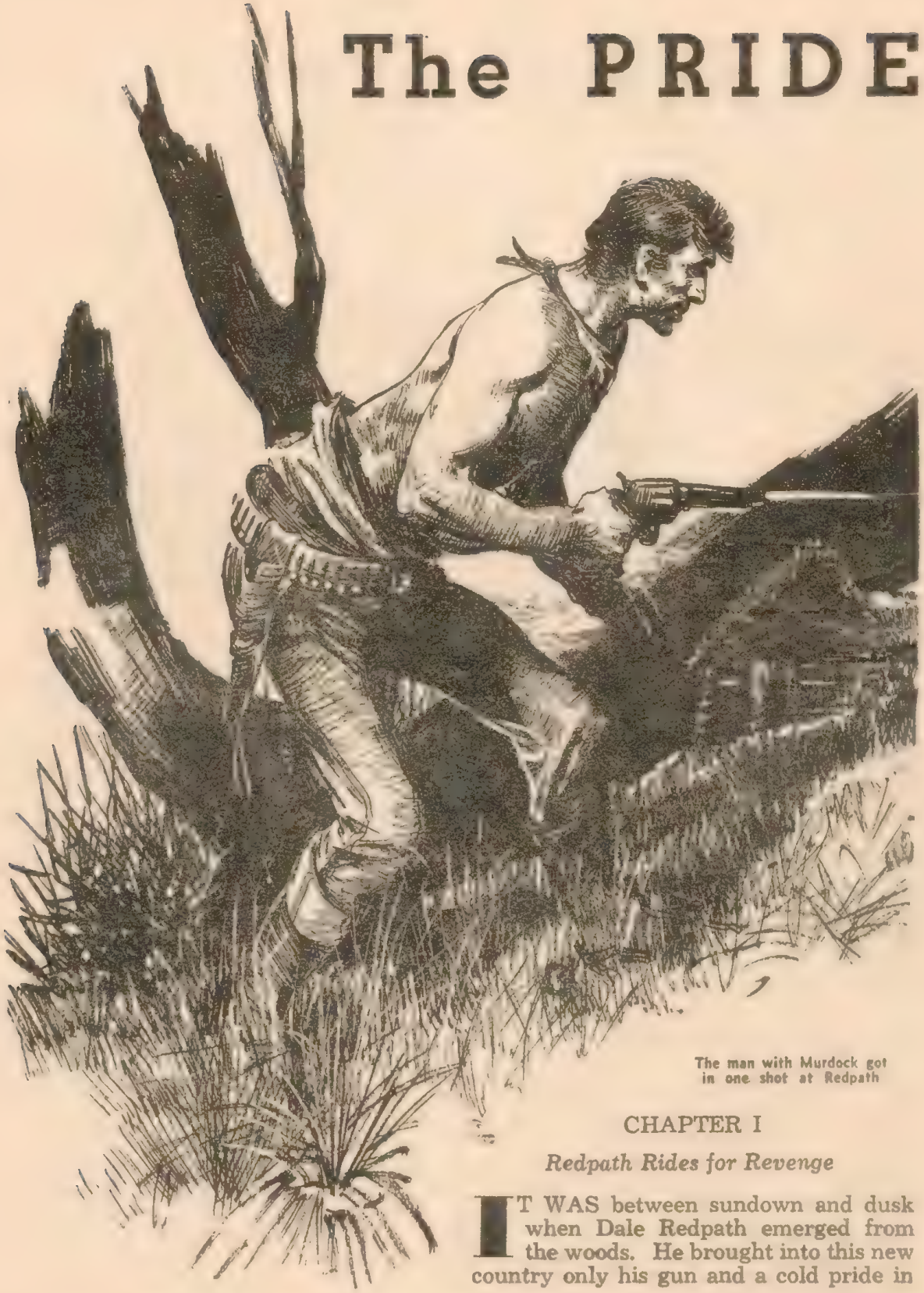


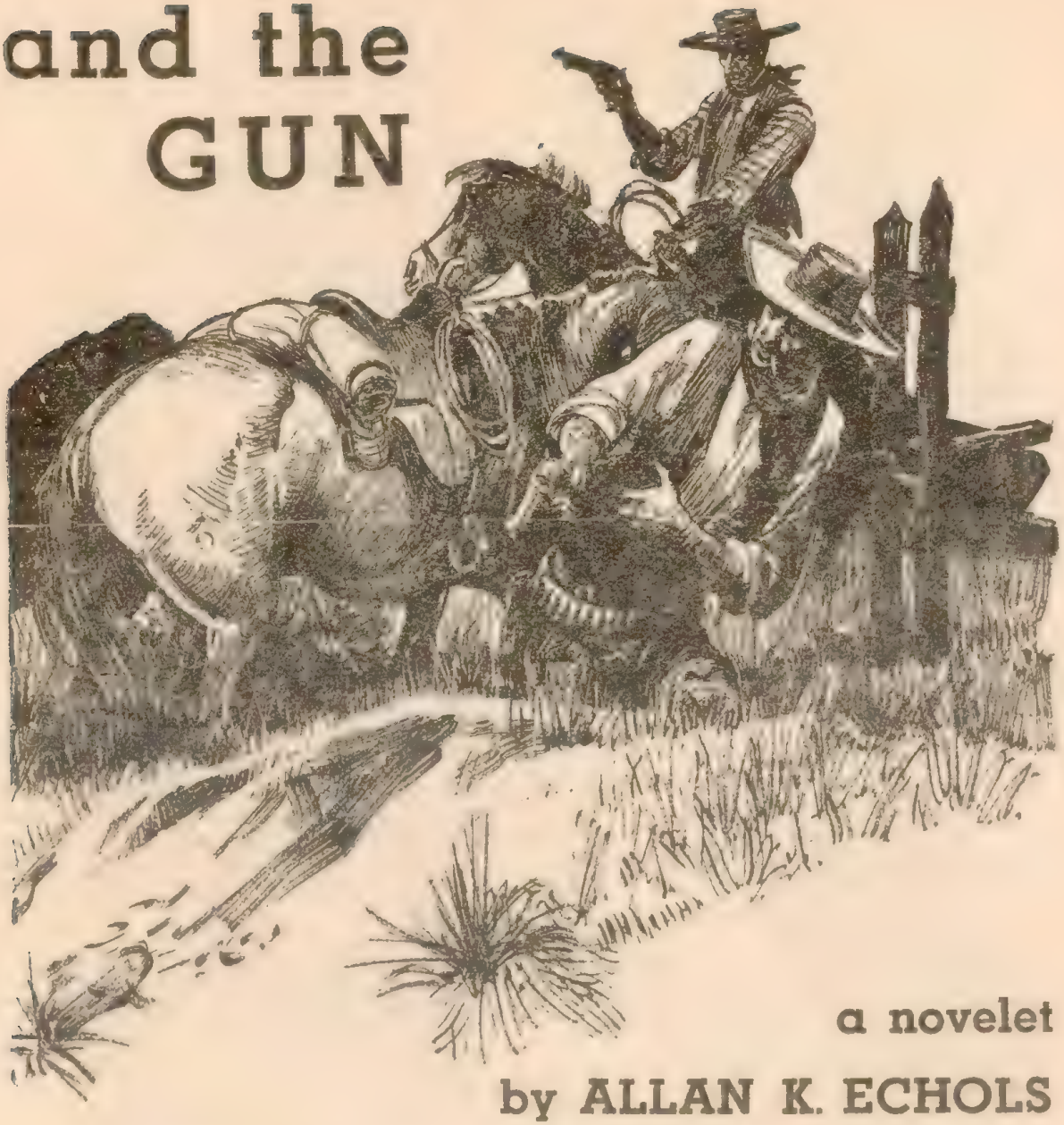
The man with Murdock got in one shot at Redpath

CHAPTER I

Redpath Rides for Revenge

IT WAS between sundown and dusk when Dale Redpath emerged from the woods. He brought into this new country only his gun and a cold pride in

and the GUN



a novelet

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

his ability to use it.

He followed the trail down through rolling flatlands of sun-dried grass. He had been in the saddle since sunup, and he had not seen water since the middle of the morning. Now he glimpsed a cabin a mile or more ahead of him, and he turned his thirsty animal toward it.

Redpath was a tall young man, riding loosely in the saddle, and the setting sun behind him made shadows under his hat, shaping his lean face into flat planes and sharp lines. His eyes had the alertness common to men who live where the only law is carried in the holster.

To the left of him there was the dust-sign of a rider who also was approaching the house, closer than he was, and when Redpath finally pulled up in front of the place, the saddled horse he had seen was

Must Make His Choice—Revenge or Justice!

standing ground hitched, and a man was talking to a woman on the porch.

This man was tall and stooped, with unusually narrow shoulders and eyes that were set very close together over a narrow, hooked nose. The way his eyebrows arched downward in the middle gave him the look of a chicken hawk.

Redpath caught the tense attitude of the woman standing there, and then as recognition came to him, he stiffened in the saddle, his two hands tightening over the horn. It had been five years since he had seen Naomi Fuller—five years during which he had searched for Winford Crowl, who had stolen her from him. Those years had etched a story of hardship on her.

SHE turned to throw a glance at him, and recognizing him, was flooded with confusion. He waited for an invitation to dismount, but it did not come, for the dust-chalked man was talking again.

"It's just like I say, we've got to have an answer now. We've waited long enough."

"My husband is not at home, but the answer is the same as it always was. This is our home and we are going to stay here." She was timidly defiant.

"Yuh might be wrong," the man said aggressively. "You gully jumpers are just makin' it hard on yoreselves. This is all Murdock graze by right of pre-emption."

"I wish you would go away," the woman said wearily. "I haven't any more to say to you."

"I ain't ready to go yet," the man countered. "I'm waitin' for an answer."

Redpath dismounted with an easy movement. "The lady said for yuh to run along, mister. Yore horse is waiting. Get on him."

The man's hawklike eyes turned on Redpath and blinked. He showed anger in his fixed stare as he sized Redpath up.

"You the ramrod here?" he asked.

"No."

"Then where do you come in? You'd better get back on yore horse and go on where yuh started."

Redpath threw the man's question back at him. "You the ramrod here?"

"What's that to you?"

"Nothing in particular. Now step down off that porch and get going," Redpath ordered.

"Maybe it don't suit me—"

Redpath's gun had been in his holster. Now it was in his hand, and he seemed to have made no movement to get it there. It was like magic. The gun apparently had jumped out of the leather, such was the speed of Redpath's draw.

"You'd better change yore mind, friend," Redpath said quietly.

The man did not flinch before the weapon trained on him. He said speculatively, "I just wonder what you would do if I didn't move? I've seen a lot of trick-draw artists, but pulling a trigger is another thing."

"You can find out easy. Just stand there till I count three. One—two—"

"All right," the man said with lazy casualness, stepping down off the porch. He went as far as his horse, had one foot in the stirrup when he turned. "Don't let this little business fool yuh, stranger. I could kill yuh any time it suits me. I had my own reasons for not doing it. If yuh stick around, I'll get to yuh when I'm ready."

He mounted, then looked at the woman again. "Don't forget, you been warned. Yore time is up." He slapped his pony with the reins and stirred up the dust on the trail to the southeast.

Redpath dropped his gun into its holster and turned to a more unpleasant meeting.

The woman was looking at him. He knew she was only twenty-three, and he felt a pain in him at the change that had come over her. She was still pretty, but her face was drawn as with some inner burden. She had become mature although she had lost weight, and her poor clothes hung loosely upon her. When she spoke now it was in a voice of great weariness.

"Howdy, Dale," she said. "How did you find us?"

There was no welcome in her speech; rather there was acceptance of a new trouble.

Redpath took off his hat, and the evening sun fell on the flat planes and hard lines of his face. Somewhere past twenty-five, the crow's-feet around his eyes made him look much older and hard. He took great pains to control his voice.

"I didn't know you were here," he said.

"I was headed for Juniper. Stopped for water." He paused a moment, intending to say no more. But the words came out against his will. "Where's Winford?"

He regretted the question, and a silence hung between them for a spell.

She took a deep breath, preparing herself. "Winford isn't here. He's over at a neighbor's. Murdock knew that, I suppose. That's why he sent Hawk Birney."

Murdock! Winford! There was irony in this, and Redpath's mouth tightened. He had been looking for Winford Crowl ever since he had come home that time five years ago. Naomi and Winford had married and left the community.

And now he had ridden up into the Territory to hire his gun to Murdock—and had met his own personal enemy.

"What's the trouble between you and Murdock?" he asked, while he tried to sort this new turn of events in his mind.

STILL fighting for self-control, the girl took a few steps back and forth on the porch. She stopped and said:

"Murdock used to graze all this flat, but a colony of us came in last year when the Indian Agency began leasing land, and we took up most of it. We're all farming, plowing up the grass and planting oats and headfeed and corn. Murdock tried to force us out by driving his stock down here when our headfeed was green and letting them destroy our crops.

"We can't afford fence, so we started planting cane for headgrain. Young cane stalks will sometimes kill cattle, and we warned him about it. But he didn't believe us, and turned his stock in on us anyway, and a lot of it died. He was furious then, and told us all we had to get out. He's a coward. He went all over the country and hired gunmen—paid killers—to come in and drive us—"

Her voice trailed off into embarrassed silence, and she looked queerly at Redpath, the expression changing from shock to a slowly-spreading horror. Her hand went to her mouth.

"You were riding to Juniper!" she said, and the unspoken accusation in her voice revealed clearly to him that she had realized why he had come to this country. She was silent, unable or unwilling to talk further to him, and the silent accusation was a thing that went through him and stirred up afresh all the old resentment he had held for her.

"What if I was?" he asked. "What do you care what I do?"

"Dale, have you lost everything that was decent about you?" Her voice was a pleading cry. "What have a little group of poor settlers done to you, that you should go murdering them for a few dollars in cash and to add to your reputation as a dangerous man. What kind of a person have you become?"

"What makes yuh think I came here to murder settlers?"

"You're a professional gunfighter, aren't you? Proud of your ability to shoot down somebody who can't draw as fast as you can. What else would a man like that be doing here, except to work for Murdock? He's the only person in this country low down enough to hire gunfighters to destroy farmers' homes."

Redpath rolled a cigarette while he fought down the impulse to argue with her. When he spoke he had his voice under control. "Yuh seem worried about *me* hurting *you*. It seems to make a difference, who does the hurting."

A new fear came to her as the import of Redpath's words struck her. "Maybe you didn't come to work for Murdock. Maybe you did come to kill Winford. I heard you were looking for him. Is that why you're here?"

"What do you think Winford deserves from me?"

What she said then was uttered carefully and with conviction. "If you were the kind of man you should have been, he would have had your congratulations. Now you intend to kill him."

"Congratulations?" he repeated. "He steals my girl behind my back, and so I offer him congratulations. Well, come to think of it, maybe yuh're right. Maybe he did me more of a favor than I realized."

"Dale, I didn't realize that a man could change so." There was a touch of sadness in the girl's voice. "You're cruel. You're cynical. You weren't that way before."

"Winford had done nothing to deserve my congratulations before."

"Dale," she said sharply, "you're wrong. Nobody was ever more wrong than you are. Winford did not steal me from you. I made my own decision about you. After I decided that I was not going to marry

you—and only after I had told him that—Winford asked me to marry him. I encouraged him because he was the kind of man I knew I wanted. You were not."

"What was the matter with me? You thought a lot of me until I went down to Cactus County to take that job to get enough money for us to get married."

"You have a short memory, Dale, or else you deliberately refuse to see the truth. You were fun then, Dale. You were wild and carefree and you had an easy laugh. You craved excitement, you had a love of adventure, and that was romantic. But you were restless. You did not want to settle down.

"I told you then, Dale, that it would not work out. I wanted a home. You did not want a woman to make a place for you to live in. You only wanted a woman to come back to when you had nowhere to go. I told you those things, and you only kissed me and laughed at me. You did not intend to live that way."

"Is yore memory longer than mine?" he asked. "I went away to get the money for us to be married on. And I came back to find you gone with Winford."

"But I told you when you left that I did not want to start a home with that kind of money," she insisted. "The man you went to work for might have been morally right in protecting his property with guns, as you argued at the time. But that does not make the man morally right who hires out his guns. That is blood money, and I would not touch it. I told you that then, and you did not believe me. I told you that if you did that, I would not be waiting for you. And you laughed at me and went away, sure that I would be there when you came back. That was pure egotism, Dale. You never did love me. You only loved yourself, and it was your egotism that was hurt when I didn't sit and wait for you."

REDPATH grunted. "And this is where your ideas landed yuh," he said. "Well, maybe yuh like this kind of a life."

Anger had been playing close beneath the surface in both of them, and now she was the first to get it under control. Her voice changed, it was a plea for understanding.

"I do like it. It is not much, but it is a start. Winford is not a dashing young man who rides all over the country on a galloping horse. He probably isn't as smart as you are, nor as fast with a gun, but he's steady. He makes me a home, and I always have him with me. That is what I've wanted, Dale, and that's what I got."

"I gathered from what the man just said, yuh won't have it long."

"That is what Murdock plans. That is why he hired gunmen like—" She bit her lip and became silent.

"—like me," he finished for her. "Yuh don't think much of me any more, do yuh?"

"It is not what I think of you, it's what I think of your ideas. You've got more in you than to be a paid gunhand. You could be something, have something—"

His eyes swept over the poor homestead. "Like this?"

"It's a home," she said defensively. "And it has a man in it who is a man and not a grown up boy who's so afraid he's not a man he has to keep on shooting people to convince himself he's grown. Winford has callouses on his hands—not blood!"

Redpath saw the anger in the girl's face, and his own anger was near to escaping his control. He did not like feeling so, for he had long cultivated the practise of keeping his emotions well buried. A man in his business had to be a machine, a well oiled and smooth running machine that would not be thrown off rhythm by anger. A man who lived by the gun could not have feelings and survive long.

He lifted his hat. "Well, it was nice to have seen yuh again." He started for his horse.

"You stopped for water," she said. "It's around back."

"Thanks! I'll manage till I get to Juniper."

CHAPTER II

Saloon Shoot-out

DALE REDPATH mounted and set his horse into a canter in the direction of the town. The light had faded and a

giant yellow moon had crawled up behind the rise to the east, laying a carpet of gentle light on the rolling land. A cool breeze drifted down from the hills, and the prairie owls floated low over the grass, their wings whispering in the night. A pair of separated quail whistled their messages back and forth before and behind him, like Indians signaling the progress of a victim, and the locusts clung to the bluegrass stems and laughed their harsh cachinnations.

He rode along the trail and the seeming peacefulness of the scene brought a discomfort to him, for he knew that it was only on the surface that there was any peace in the night. Men were awake, plotting attack on their neighbors; and other men were awake and watchful lest their neighbors destroy them. The quail swallowed the locust, and the owl devoured the quail, and there was no peace in the land.

Nor was there peace beneath the calm surface of Redpath, for the meeting with the girl had somehow destroyed that. The things she had said somehow shook his faith in the things he had taken to be simple truths.

When a man stole your girl behind your back, you went out and got him. That was the rule. That was what was expected of Redpath, and what he expected of himself. He had never questioned the rightness of it. But Naomi had told him that it was she, and not Winford Crowl, who had made the decision. Did that exonerate Crowl? Redpath could not find an answer which satisfied his pride.

It had become Redpath's way not to let any dislike of a fact blind him to it, for he had seen men die who, from pride or wishfulness, had refused to recognize a truth when it was presented to them. That was folly for a man who lived by the gun. To overestimate himself, to underestimate an enemy—such misjudgments were more often fatal than not.

WAS it a fact that he was only a boy playing at being a dangerous gunman? Was he living in the world of "As Though," immature, but acting as though he were a man, a selfish youngster who had lost his girl to a more stable man, but acting the part of an emotionless mercenary gunhand? Or was he, as he had believed up to now, the real thing, the man his carefully built reputation made him out to be?

He could not believe the things Naomi had said; he was not an undeveloped man acting like a selfish youth who had been deprived of one of his sources of amusement. That could not have been the case. Perhaps adventure, more than earning the wedding money, had played a part in his decision to take that first gun job, but when he had come back and found Naomi gone, he had grown up overnight. She had shown him her contempt for a gunhand, and he in turn had set out to show her that he could amount to something in that line. Then he had dismissed her from his mind, as not worth the anger of the kind of man he was going to be. Kill Winford Crowl and then forget the whole matter!

But had he got her out of his mind? Did he secretly still love her?

Redpath did not like the confusion that these conflicting ideas brought to him, and he forced his mind into other and less disagreeable channels, but they left him with a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety, and this feeling, itself, added to his discomfort. A man had to be calm, cold, indifferent.

The wagon ruts he had been following in the moonlight were joined by other sets coming in from neighboring homesteads, weaving their strands into the semblance of a country road. It was a snakelike trail that wound over rises, across draws and through the white shoals of wooded creeks and dried-up wet-weather streams.

He rode up out of the thick shadows along one of these creekbeds and came squarely upon three horsemen, the sound of whose approach had been drowned out by the sound of his own animal's feet in the water and on the gravel. He reined up with quick alertness, but the men had heard him first and were waiting, motionless, their animals spread across the trail. Their rifles rested across their saddles, the muzzles pointed in Redpath's direction.

Redpath saw that he was covered and made no effort to reach for either his rifle or handgun. He kept his surprise under control, and when he spoke his voice was quiet and natural.

"Got business with me, gents?" he asked softly.

The man who answered him, and who was evidently the leader of the group, was large and inclined to fatness, and his voice was that of a man who was accustomed to using authority.

"It could be," the man said. "I'll let yuh know when I find out who yuh are."

"And suppose yuh don't find out who I am?" Redpath retorted.

"I'll find out, all right. What's yore name, and what are yuh doin', millin' around here in the dark?"

"Suppose yuh tell me yore name and what yuh're doin', millin' around here in the dark?" Redpath countered.

"That's my business, friend. And it's my business to find out who you are."

"You've got too much curiosity," Redpath answered. "It might get yuh in trouble some of these days. Now just move off my path."

One of the men said, "Listen to him," and the other answered, "He must be bad stuff."

"Would yuh like to find out?" Redpath asked.

The leader snapped, "Shut up, Joe," and turned back to Redpath. "I'm waiting for yuh to give yoreself a name and state yore business."

"Yuh really got that much time to waste?" Redpath's voice was almost gentle.

The man called Joe said, "Look at that warbag on his saddle. He's just a pilgrim, Troy, and don't know no better. What shall we do with him?"

"Pilgrims wouldn't be here without they had business here," the leader answered. "And I'm going to find out about this gent."

"I'll tell yuh something, friend," Redpath said. "Nobody finds out about my business unless it suits me to tell him. I take it that yuh're Troy Murdock, and in that case, I'll tell yuh what I'm doing here."

"All right, I'm Troy Murdock, and now answer my question."

"My name is Redpath, and a man by the name of Frijole Joe down in Concho hired me to work for yuh. Know anything about that?"

"Why didn't yuh say so?" the man snapped. He dropped his rifle into the saddle boot, and his men did likewise. "I been expecting yuh a week. Where were yuh?"

"I took my time about getting here. You want to tell me more about the proposition?"

"Just trouble," the man said. "I've heard about you, and Frijole says yuh're good. I've got a little business now, but Joe'll take yuh on into town, and we'll have a talk when I get back." He turned to one of the riders. "Go on in with Redpath and have Pete fix him up with a room and whatever he wants." Then he said to Redpath, "I'm in kind of a hurry now. The boys'll fix yuh up at Pete's Place, and I'll see yuh after a while."

THE two parties got on their way, and Joe rode in silence beside Redpath. After a while, he said, "Look, Redpath, I didn't mean anything personal back there on the trail, understand. It's just that there's plenty of trouble around here, and yuh can't take a chance on anybody yuh don't know."

"I know," Redpath answered. "Forget it."

He was not thinking much about the man beside him, but was giving his mind to other matters. There was something wrong with this deal somewhere, or with his attitude toward it, and he was trying to get it straightened out in his mind, but couldn't. He didn't even know for sure that he would go to work for Murdock, even though Frijole had advanced him a hundred dollars on wages. He had business of his own with Winford Crowl, and that might have to come first.

At a crossroads not far from town he and Joe came upon a little group of four men riding out. These horsemen were armed and they separated, two and two, letting Redpath and Joe pass between them. They rode alert in their saddles, hands not far from their guns, and they did not speak as they passed by in the moonlight.

"Neighborly people around here," Redpath commented.

"Settlers. We got 'em scared and they hate us because we're cracking down on 'em, and they don't know where we'll hit 'em next."

They went on to town and after Redpath had watered his horse, Joe took him

into the combined rooming place and bar run by the man named Pete. Redpath made for the bar and got a beer to wash the traildust out of his parched mouth. He was on his second beer when the batwing doors opened and Hawk Birney came in. Watching through the backbar mirror, Redpath saw the man stop just inside the door and knew Birney had recognized him.

Joe, who was standing beside Redpath, saw him watching the newcomer, and said, "That's Hawk Birney, Murdock's foreman. You'll want to meet him."

"I've met him," Redpath said, his eyes not leaving Birney.

Joe saw that there were forces playing between Redpath and Birney which he didn't understand, and he showed his discomfort. He moved down the bar away from Redpath as Birney came slowly into the room. From Birney's actions, nobody in the room doubted that this was trouble.

Birney stopped in the middle of the room, his eyes unwaveringly on Redpath as the latter set down his beer glass and turned around so that his back was to the bar. Birney was breathing audibly, and his body was tense, while Redpath seemed completely at ease, as though he did not know the tension that hung heavy over the room.

Birney said, "I just saw Murdock, Joe, and he told me you'd brought a new man in with you. This him?" He kept his eyes on Redpath as he addressed Joe.

"Yeah," Joe answered uneasily. "This is Redpath. He's joining up with us."

"No, he ain't! He's a friend of the settlers. Maybe even spying for 'em. Yuh can't tell. Anyhow, it don't matter. I got me a personal crow to pick with him."

"You'd better think a long time before you start, Birney," Redpath said easily. "The wrong set of feathers might start flying."

"Nobody makes my feathers fly," Birney answered.

Redpath saw the man's intentions in his expression and knew that he would draw, for Birney had a touchy pride, an unthinking rage in the face of a threat.

Birney's feet spread slightly as he balanced himself; his body stiffened, and the finger of his right hand twitched. All these fleeting signs Redpath saw before Birney's hand darted for his gun.

Then, feeling a great contempt for a man who fancied himself a gunslinger, Redpath drew his gun and shot the man squarely between the eyes.

Redpath spun on his heel and caught Joe with his gun out and his trigger finger tightening. Redpath's second shot got Joe in the mouth.

But reflex action caused Joe's dead finger to complete its pull, and his slug burned into the hollow just below Redpath's left shoulder, knocking him back against the bar.

BIRNEY and Joe were dead on the floor as Redpath caught his weight against the bar and kept on his feet. Two men slid out the side door in a hurry, leaving only the bartender. Redpath was turning toward him just as the bartender knocked the light out with a whisky bottle, and the room went black.

Redpath's left side burned with the heat of a branding iron, and the ache spread clear back to his neck muscles and built up to a scorching throb.

He did not move, waiting to see what the bartender would do, but that man was dead silent, wanting no part of the fight. Redpath stood still like an owl on a post and waited, and as the pain burned in him, an overpowering thirst gripped him. He reached over and felt for his beer glass on the bar and drank it empty. Then he started toward the door, his gun fanning the location of the bar in the darkness. Still the bartender did not make a move.

With each step Redpath was conscious of his knees revolting at his weight, and the pain in his shoulder was now darting into his chest and down his side. He found his horse, unhitched him and started to throw himself into the saddle but couldn't do it. He had to crawl up, using only his right hand to cling to the horn. His body felt heavy. He had to get out of Troy Murdock's town and get his wound bandaged.

He pushed his animal down the street which soon degenerated into a country road, and kept on it a spell, trying to figure out what to do. He couldn't expect help from Murdock; the bartender would report the details of the killing of Murdock's men along with Birney's accusation that Redpath was in sympathy with the

settlers. Murdock would be gunning for him.

As he rode the pain in him built up to an almost unbearable intensity. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth against it, and the earth seemed to be whirling around him. He tried to drive the thought of pain away by setting his mind to the task of figuring out where his mistake had been.

But he could see nothing for which he could blame himself. Birney had come in and had shown fight so quickly, and the whole thing had happened so fast that Redpath simply had not had time to think about Joe.

Joe had been a pretty fast thinker himself, or else there had been perfect teamwork between him and Birney. Redpath had been whipsawed by two men, both slower than himself. Yet between them they had been able at least to get one shot into him. Good as he was, Redpath simply couldn't look two ways at once.

There was no use thinking about the fight now; it was over. The present problem was to get the wound dressed, but he didn't have a friend that he could go to for help. The thought of Naomi flashed through his mind, and he dismissed it as quickly as it came. Even in his pain, his face twisted into a smile.

"Wouldn't that be something?" he asked himself. "Go running to her the minute I get a little nick in my arm."

The pain became a living thing, protesting at every jolt of the saddle and increasing with every bounce. He had thought a lot about pain before, for he had seen men suffer, and he had reached the conclusion that giving in to it was a weakness. Any man, he had thought, could stand any amount of it if he made up his mind to stand it. Now he was learning something about pain that he hadn't known. It was a thief, robbing you of your strength; it even entered into your brain and drained away the ability to think clearly. This last fact was evident now, and it was disturbing, because he realized, in his lucid intervals, that there were spells when he was not able to think at all, and thus he was vulnerable to any danger. There was the possibility that he might lose his life during one of those spells.

He thought of tying his legs together under the belly of his horse, so that in his encroaching weakness he would not fall off, but knew that was impossible. He thought of going into hiding, in the hope that the weakness would wear off, but this was open country and there was no place of retreat for him.

He tried more and more hopelessly to consider possibilities, and was less and less able to cope with them as time passed and the trail rolled out behind him. He began to imagine lights dancing before him, but there was one, far ahead of him, which seemed more steady than the others. And this one was outside his brain. Through the nightmare of pain he clung desperately to the hope that occasional glimpse of the light ahead gave him.

CHAPTER III

Judgment

WHEN Redpath regained his consciousness he was lying on a cot in a ranchhouse. He had been stripped of his gun and shirt and knew that his shoulder had been dressed. There was an oil lamp in the room and men were gathered about it. Redpath judged that he had not been unconscious very long, for they were debating what they should do with him. He kept his eyes closed and listened.

"I tell yuh he's one of Murdock's gunhands," one of the men said. "I saw him riding into town with Murdock's Joe Hefley. And besides, he's got 'gunhand' branded all over him. That tied-down holster, his gun oiled like a fine watch, the very look of his face."

Then came a voice that sent a tingle along Redpath's nerves—the voice of Winford Crowl speaking.

"That might be," Crowl said quietly. "And it might not. We haven't heard his story. In the meantime, he's a friend of mine. I mean—well, he used to be, and he might have been coming here to visit me. We used to be pretty close. You see how it is, don't yuh?"

Another man said, "You can't take chances, Crowl. If he's a Murdock man,

what's the use of nursing a snake that'll bite yuh the minute he's well enough? I ain't in favor of wasting sympathy and time on a man that'll be shooting yuh down the minute he's well enough to lift a gun. That's how his type will repay yuh for yore help."

Still another man, "I feel the same way Charlie does. I've got a wife and family that comes first with me."

Crowl's voice showed uncertainty, his struggle for a satisfactory answer. "I just don't know what to say. It's like yuh say, all right, but still, a man can't just turn his back on a man that was his friend."

There was a silence in the room as the sound of a hurrying horseman came in through the open door, and after a moment, Redpath, still lying with his eyes closed, heard a man come into the room, the sound of his boots telling the urgency of his business.

"Murdock shot Papa," the man said. "Him and a couple of his men were at the house, and Papa and Bud and me tried to hold out against 'em. They opened up on us from outside, shootin' in through the windows. They kept us penned in while they fired the barn and the house. Papa rushed 'em, and they shot him down, then rode off. I left Bud with him, and come a-runnin'."

THE news stunned the little group into a long silence, and then one of the settlers spoke to Winford Crowl.

"There yuh go, Winford. It's reached the killing stage now, and there ain't no middle ground. See what I mean?"

There was another silence while Winford Crowl thought this over. Then he spoke, evidently to the new arrival. "Nate, this fellow here rode up here, wounded, and fell off his horse in the front yard. Would yuh know whether he's one of the bunch that was at yore house?"

The man walked over close to the bunk and after a while he said, "No, he ain't."

"But still, he's one of that crowd," one of the men said.

"We haven't had his word that he is," Winford argued. "He could have just fallen in with Joe Hefley, not knowing who he was. Anyhow, Nate says he's not one of the bunch that killed Forrester."

The mild voice of a man who seemed to be elderly and careful in his opinions came next. "We've got to act in accordance with justice, not letting our anger warp our judgments. I've seen a few court trials back where I came from, and I know one principle of law that they always use. And that is, if a group of men conspire to commit a crime, but only one of 'em actually does the crime, the whole group is equally guilty. That is always so. Murdock and his men are banded together to drive us off the range, and in that conspiracy, they have killed Al Forrester. In the eyes of the law, they are all guilty of murder, no matter which one fired the shot that killed Al. If this man is a gun-hand in the employ of Murdock, then he is equally guilty of that murder, even though he was not at the scene of the crime."

"Defending ourselves is one thing; appointing ourselves to sit in judgment on a man's life is another," Crowl objected. "We'd be as lawless as they are."

"Yuh're wrong there, Winford, to my way of thinking. Look at it this way: The law is the expression of the will of the majority of right minded people. It's collected together and enforced by men hired for the purpose, in places where there's enough people to do it. We are the majority of the right-minded people here; we're the law. It's just that we haven't got anybody hired to express our will, so we have to do it ourselves. It ain't only our right, it's our duty. We can't let one man set himself up as bigger than all of us, without fear of punishment."

"He's right, Crowl," someone else said. "It's true that nobody wants to put a rope around another man's neck, particularly if he's a friend of yores. It ain't a pleasant duty, but a man's duty to his community has got to come first, whether it hurts or not."

Redpath heard feet pacing the room and judged it to be Crowl, searching his conscience for an answer to this argument. It was strange that lying here almost in a stupor, and with his eyes closed, but with his mind working freely, he could almost see the minds of these other men working. And because he had not seen the faces with which he could have associated their voices, he got the impression that he was hearing the detached voice of

abstract, impersonal justice, in the cases of all of them except Winford.

Winford's attitude was the one which troubled Redpath. It was not easy for him to hear a man whom for five years, he had been intending to kill, defending him on the basis of friendship. Lying on the cot, he tried to argue that this was a weakness of the man, but he could not make himself swallow his own argument. He knew differently, Winford was not a weakling, he was a man whose sense of loyalty to a friendship—even an old one that no longer held obligations—led him to stand up against his neighbors, and even to place a strain on his own sense of right and wrong. This was a new thing to Redpath.

Winford had evidently come to his difficult decision, for he stopped pacing. "Here's the way I feel about it," he said. "I can't forget that I've been his friend, and I can't deny what Uncle Bascomb says about his guilt if he is tied to Murdock. I won't try to obstruct justice if it is clear that he's guilty, but the only evidence we've got of that is that he was seen with one of Murdock's men. He hasn't had his say—"

"How could you believe his say if he said it?" somebody asked cynically. "A man facing a hanging might be slightly tempted to prefer stretching the truth to stretching a rope."

"What I was saying," Winford said with the finality of conviction, "was that he shouldn't be convicted without his side being heard. I'll take responsibility for him until he is well enough, and his case can be settled fair."

Redpath had always considered himself a fair man; he had never shot a man without giving the enemy an equal chance. It dawned on him now that this practise was not all there was to fairness. He would have given Winford a chance to draw before he shot him dead, but was that fair? Winford still wouldn't have actually had a chance to survive. And even so, he certainly had not planned to give Winford a chance to say whether he had actually stolen Naomi from him. It was the little things, the hidden things, that made right and wrong. Things a man could miss seeing.

The settlers went on to discuss other matters, and Redpath learned some things from their talk. Murdock had already burned out three families, and the settlers were here in this place to organize their resistance against him, to decide whether they should do it with some semblance of law, or as a simple vigilance committee, whether they should shoot Murdock and his men on sight or organize a court to try any they might catch. This was why Winford had been away from home and why Redpath's own fate had been discussed while they thought he was still unconscious.

Redpath saw now that his life had been hanging in the balance and that Winford Crowl had saved it, temporarily.

Crowl's friendship would not be able to save him indefinitely from the wrath generated by Murdock's murderous tactics, and Redpath gave thought to his own safety. His wound still had a deep burning ache in it, but he was in better shape than he had been at the end of his ride. Apparently his great weakness and his period of unconsciousness had been more the result of shock, which had now worn off, than of the seriousness of the wound. He felt that he was capable of getting up and around.

But he was a prisoner, paroled to Winford Crowl and unarmed, waiting trial for his life.

CHAPTER IV

Vindication

THE men were still talking when one of them who had stepped outside rushed back in.

"Horses coming," he announced. "Sounds like a lot of 'em. From the direction of town."

"Murdock," somebody answered, as they listened silently for a moment. "Not that many people around outside of us, except his bunch."

The man called Uncle Bascomb said, "Him hittin' Forrester and then comin' here, it looks like he's figgerin' on making a sudden clean sweep tonight. Boys, better get your saddle horses hid so he won't know we're all collected here and change his plans. Better that we meet him all

together than for him to wait till we get separated."

There was a sudden scurrying of feet as the men poured out of the house to get their horses into concealment. In the excitement of the aproaching battle, nobody concerned himself to stand guard over the wounded man on the cot in the kitchen.

Redpath heard the last man's departing steps and opened his eyes and tried his strength. He was weak—very weak—and his movements gave him excruciating pains in his left shoulder and side, but he got up off the cot, and went about looking for his gun. He found it in the oven of the cold kitchen stove and buckled it on.

Then he went out into the darkness and disappeared into a shallow draw about a hundred yards from the house. He heard the settlers trooping back into the house, and the sound of the approaching horsemen was clearer now. In a few minutes he saw the dim forms of eight or ten men as they reached the house and spread out to encircle it.

As they moved about, Redpath came out of the gully, pressed his left arm to his tortured side, and started back toward the house. He was about fifty feet from the front of the place when Murdock's voice was raised in arrogant command.

"Dan Jones, come out of there. We're going to burn the place."

HE HEARD the answer from indoors, "You'd better go away, Murdock, or I will not be responsible for what happens. I'm warnin' yuh that yuh'll be killed."

Murdock answered, "We'll let yuh leave peaceable if you come out now, but we're goin' to burn yore place. If you don't come out we'll riddle the place with lead."

Dale Redpath had not stopped walking, though the weakness in him made it hard going. Murdock was sitting his horse in the moonlight in front of the house, and only one of his men was visible beside him, the rest having encircled the place. Redpath walked directly toward Murdock. He was within twenty-five feet of him when he stopped beneath a big sycamore tree.

"Murdock," he called, "this is Redpath. Call off yore men before a shot is fired or I'll kill yuh."

Murdock raged back at him. "Redpath! You double-crossing skunk. I'll take a look at the stripe down yore back."

He slid off his horse, using the side away from Redpath, and came around the horse's hind quarters, his rage forcing him into almost a run.

He clawed at his gun with desperate awkwardness and fired it at Redpath on the run, as though he could not get at the man too soon. He fired a second time, and again the bullet missed. Then he seemed to realize his rashness for he stopped dead still, lifted the gun barrel and brought it down into aim more carefully.

Redpath shot him through the chest, the bullet knocking Murdock flat on his back. He lay that way a moment as though to regain his breath, and in that minute, while Redpath was watching him, the man who had been with Murdock got in one shot at Redpath, sending a bullet through the soft part of his leg.

Redpath shot him off his horse with one well-placed bullet, then turned his attention back to Murdock.

Murdock had rolled over onto his hands and knees and was trying to get up onto his feet. He made it, but stood swaying. He turned around this way and that until he again saw Redpath, and then lifted his gun. Redpath shot him again, in the head this time, and Murdock died before he hit the ground.

Redpath had backed up against the trunk of the sycamore because he could no longer stand alone, and leaning against the tree he called out:

"You men! This is Redpath, the man that killed Birney. I've just killed Murdock and yore wages have stopped. Yuh're not gettin' paid any more to turn your guns on this house, and besides, there's a whole army in there waitin' for yuh. Any of you want to come and face me, I'm here. Come and get me. Otherwise, yore business is finished here. Speak up. Say yore piece, or ride off on yore own business, or keep quiet and I'll hunt yuh down. What'll it be?"

There was a long silence while the gun hands took stock of their position. They had no jobs now, as Redpath had reminded them.

A voice out of the darkness said, "I ain't got no quarrel with you, Redpath, nor these settlers, either, with Murdock dead. All right for me to ride past yuh?"

"Ride past and keep movin'," Redpath said. "They're needin' hands in New Mexico, I hear."

"I'd been puttin' off to see that territory," the man said with wry humor. "Now's as good time as any." He rode out of the shadows of the house, exposing himself in the moonlight as he took the trail back to Juniper.

Another man yelled, "Hey, wait, Maloney. I'm headin' that way, myself."

And a third one said, "Me, too." Others, still fearing to expose themselves to Redpath, melted into the night.

Redpath slid wearily down to a sitting position with his back against the sycamore tree. The settlers found him there when they went out and scouted the homestead, now empty of enemies. There was some embarrassment among them, for his accusers had heard the whole business between him and Murdock. Winford was squatting beside him to see how badly hurt he was. "I thought yuh'd lit out," he said.

"That would have left you in a tight spot," Redpath answered. "And I reckon I'd better get yuh out of another spot with yore neighbors by explainin' why I'm here. They were right and you were wrong about me comin' to work for Murdock. I'd been workin' for gun wages in jobs where I thought the man I was workin' for was right, but maybe I wasn't always too good a judge of who was right and who was wrong. Maybe I hadn't tried too hard to judge carefully. Maybe I saw a lot of things wrong. Anyhow, here's my gun, and I won't be tryin' to get away if yore friends want me to stand trial. If I get a chance to settle here, I want to do it with a clean slate or not at all."

"You hadn't actually done any work for Murdock?" an old man in the crowd asked.

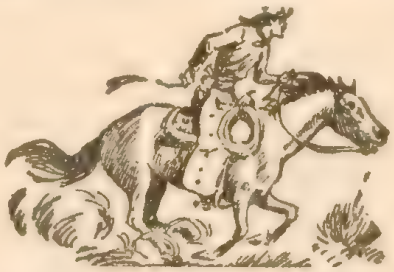
"No. I just got in tonight, and the first thing I did was kill a couple of his men. I couldn't have gone to work for him after that even if I'd wanted to."

The old man scratched his beard. "That, and what you done for us, savin' bloodshed, and you statin' your feelin's, is all the trial yuh need, far as I'm concerned. I'm proud to give yuh welcome."

It was the first hand of friendship that had been extended to him in five years, and it gave him a good feeling. He wanted to make it last and knew that more of it could be had for the earning. That was all the chance he wanted.

"Tell Naomi," he said to Winford, "that as soon as I'm able to get around, I'll be over to see you and her for dinner some Sunday when yuh have chicken."

"There'll always be chicken for dinner whenever yuh drop in," Winford assured him, gripping his hand with hearty friendship.



The Mail Goes Through

THE famed Pony Express never lost the mail through fire, blizzard, Indian or outlaw attack. Only once in its career was the mail ever lost.

On a dark night in July, 1860, a Pony Express rider was pounding up the trail with the semi-weekly mail for Denver. He reached the South Platte River and his horse's hoofs drummed like hollow thunder on the planks of the bridge. But the drumming failed to awaken an ox who was blissfully asleep in the middle of the bridge. And it was too dark for even the horse to see this massive obstruction in his path. There was a crash, one wild yell from the rider, then a mighty splash.

Downstream aways, the rider crawled out, dripping and spluttering. But ox, horse and mail were never seen again. It was the one and only mail loss in Pony Express history.

—Rex Sherrick

"Hear you been talkin' about me, Dillon!" Marshall said, his hand on his gun

TEN SILVER DOLLARS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

THE GAME of stud poker that had been going on in the back room of the Last Chance Saloon was over now, and of the six men who had been playing only Tom Dillon and Lem Wade were still there. They sat at the big round table talking.

"You ever notice the way you take a dislike to some men the first time yuh run across them, Lem?" Dillon asked casually.

He leaned back in his chair, big and young and a top-hand who worked for the Cross In A Box south of the town.

"Shore." Lem Wade touched his gray mustache. "I felt that way often. Just the sight of a stranger kind of gets yore hackles up sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"Just thinkin' about Brad Marshall," Dillon said.

"Brad Marshall?" The owner of the Walking W looked surprised. "Always figgered you two were friends, seeing as you both work for the same outfit and all."

"You figgered wrong," Dillon said. "Not that me and Marshall ever really tangled, but he just ain't the kind of gent I'd trust."

Wade did not ask any more questions, and the two men dropped the subject. "I'm glad it's spring," Wade said. "I had a tough winter and lost a lot of stock, what with the snow and freezin' cold and all. How'd yore outfit do?"

"Just about got by, I reckon," Dillon said. "At least the boss ain't doin' any loud shoutin' like he usually does when things go wrong. All the ranchers around here seem kind of worried about them payroll robberies. Three cattlemen held up and robbed during the past month."

"I know." Wade nodded, and then yawned. "Reckon I'll be calling it a night."

The door suddenly swung open and a blond cowboy stood there, his hand on the gun in his holster, as he glared at Tom Dillon.

"Hear you been doin' a lot of talkin' about me, Dillon," Brad Marshall said, his voice harsh with anger. "That you're hinting around I might be the bandit who's stealing those payrolls. I don't like it."

"Somebody around here is the feller they call the Ghost Horseman," Dillon said quietly. "Somebody who knows just about when every cattleman around here draws the cash out of the bank to pay off his men. That somebody could be you, Marshall."

"Or you!" snapped Marshall. "Usually the hombre who is guilty spends a lot of time tryin' to make somebody else look mighty suspicious."

The Ghost Horseman takes a hand in a poker game!

"Unless he is real smart," said Dillon. "Then he just sits tight and does nothing."

"Get up!" Marshall snapped. "I'm going to teach you not to talk about me."

DILLON pushed back his chair and stood up. Lem Wade remained seated at the table. Obviously he had decided this wasn't his fight and he didn't want any part of it. Dillon and Marshall stood glaring at each other for an instant.

"When Jeff Adams was robbed the day before yesterday he had ten brand new silver dollars that he got from the bank along with the payroll money," Dillon said. "You happen to have any silver dollars on you, Marshall?"

"Why you—" Marshall roared.

He aimed a hard right fist at Dillon's chin. Dillon rolled with the blow, and the fist slid harmlessly over his shoulder. He landed a blow to Marshall's chest that sent the blond cowboy reeling back. Then they closed in again, pounding at each other. Marshall hit Dillon and he staggered dizzily. He stumbled against Lem Wade's chair before the owner of the Walking W could get out of the way.

"Hey, look out!" Wade shouted as the chair tumbled over and he went down, with Dillon on top of him.

From the two fallen men there came the rattle of heavy silver. Marshall stared at the silver dollars—five of them—that had rolled out onto the floor, and then he swiftly drew his gun. Dillon found himself covered as he got to his feet.

"No wonder you knew about them silver dollars, Dillon," Marshall said. "They dropped out of yore pocket when you fell."

"That's right," Wade said as he got to his feet. "Five silver dollars all dated Eighteen-Ninety-Eight, just like the ones that were stolen from Jeff Adams."

"So you are the Ghost Horseman," Marshall said, glaring at Dillon. "No wonder you been so anxious to make folks suspicious of me."

Dillon remained silent, a sullen expression on his face. Wade drew his gun.

"Go get Sheriff Cooper," the rancher told Marshall. "I'll keep him covered until you get back. Hurry, Marshall."

"All right." Marshall stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Wade stood watching Dillon warily, keeping the big cowboy covered with the gun the rancher held. Dillon moved back a little, as though he did not like being so close to the muzzle of the .45.

He managed to catch his foot in the rung of the chair behind him.

"You made one mistake, Wade," he said.

"I know." Wade nodded. "I shouldn't have mentioned the dates." He frowned. "Too bad you noticed that. I don't think that Marshall did, or that the silver dollars dropped out of my pocket—not yours. Now I'll have to kill you. I'll pretend you tried to escape."

"The bad winter left you broke—desperate enough to do the payroll robberies," said Dillon. "Funny, I figgered if we could find a man who needed money bad he might be the Ghost Horseman—and that was right."

His foot came up, dragging the chair with it just as Wade's thumb snapped back the hammer on the gun. Dillon ducked and the bullet thudded into the wall of the room in line with where his head had been a moment ago. The chair went flying through the air, hit Wade squarely on the chest and knocked his gun from his hand.

"I didn't feel like dyin' right now," Dillon said dryly, covering Wade with his own gun. "Just ain't in the mood for it."

A few moments later Marshall hurried back into the room with Sheriff Cooper close behind him. A look of relief swept over Marshall's face as he saw Dillon standing there covering Wade with his gun.

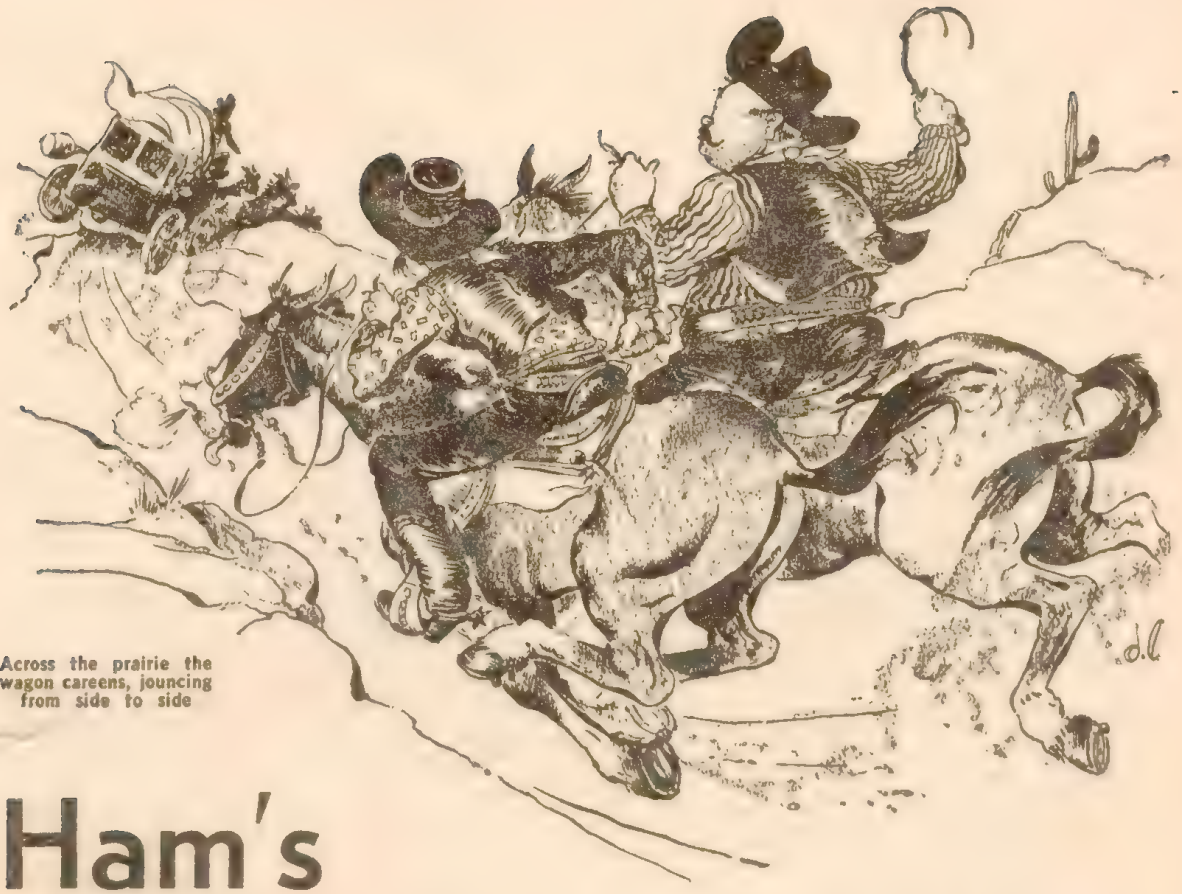
"Shore glad you're all right, Tom," Marshall said. "Wasn't until after I went for the sheriff that I realized the slip he had made. How'd he know those silver dollars had the same date on 'em, if he never saw 'em? I was afraid he'd shoot you."

"He tried to shoot me, Brad," Dillon said with a smile. "He missed." Dillon looked at the sheriff. "Here's the Ghost Horseman, sheriff."

"Prove it!" snapped Wade.

"That's easy," said Dillon. "Ten of those silver dollars were stolen from Adams, so the other five must still be in your pockets." The look on the rancher's face told him he was right.

"All right, boys," Sheriff Cooper said. "I told you if you got the Ghost Horseman I'd give you jobs as my deputies. Looks like you're hired."



Across the prairie the wagon careens, jouncing from side to side

Ham's Goose Is Cooked

by ALFRED L. GARRY

When Sheriff Egg's deputy becomes a chuckwagon chef, the durn contraption turns into a plumb swift-racin' chariot!

MY DEPUTY, Ham, thumps his chest like a gorilla, sweeps his arm around the horizon, taking in all seven cow states, and brags:

"I can outfight, outsmart, and outcook any roundup hairpin from here to Texas!"

A happy expression comes over the faces of the half-dozen ranchers who are grouped about Ham at Freddie's Bar. They are buying him refreshments right freely.

"That ain't what Sheriff Rawson, over in Buckstrap County, says." Bill Mivvens, who owns the VV, needles. "He allows his soda biscuits are lighter than goose down, and delectable as a schoolma'am's kiss!"

"Bah!" Ham snorts. "That halt-brain don't know enough to boil whistleberries!"

"So?" Bill's voice has a teasing edge. "Well, Rawson's going to cook for the Buckstrap boys at the Big Roundup! He's boastin' how his super-deluxe grub will have all us Sweetgrass hairpins leavin'

our chuckwagon just to eat what he throws away!"

"What!" Ham bellows, his face getting beet red. He nigh has a fit of apoplexy at the insult as he goes on, "Say, who you fellers got cookin' for yuh at the Big Roundup?"

"We don't exactly know," Bill says, as all the ranchers shake their heads in mighty sorrowful doubt. "Most likely we'll send to an employment agency for a cook."

"A mail-order dough wrangler!" Ham's appalled. "A unknown robber. Why, for two cents, I'd—"

"You'd what?"

The anxious ranchers crowd around my deputy. Their ears are throwed forward for Ham's next word, like a band of hungry jackasses watching a hostler approach with a bucket of oats.

"Why, dang it, fellers, I'll cook for the roundup myself!" Ham declares, throwing out his chest.

"Fine! Swell! It's a deal!" The ranchers are all pounding Ham joyous on the back.

"Freddie, fill the deputy's glass!" one of them cries. "Yore private stock, man! None of yore ordinary bar red-eye for the best darned roundup cook in all the cow country!"

WHILE they are crowding around Ham, my pardner, catches my eye, I ain't looking none too pleased.

"Aw, how about my law work?" Ham appeals to the ranchers. "There's Longloop Simpson on the loose."

"Yuh're darned tootin'!" I get in my downright two-bits' worth. "Here, you fellers shanghai my deputy just when I'm plagued to death by Longloop and his gang. After the roundup yuh'll be the first to jump down my throat if yore beef tally is shy!"

"I'd be willing to lose a few critters, just to have Ham cooking for us!" Bill Mivvens speaks up.

"That's about the way I feel, too!" Tom Furlong says. "When Ham's cookin', the crew's contented. We always get a heap more work out of the boys."

"Yeah!" "Scotty" McAngus, a tin can bachelor drools. "Good grub's worth a lot. As soon as word gets around that Ham's running the chuckwagon, waddies from all over the state will be beggin' to hire on. I'm cuttin' my wages three dollars a month on the strength of it! Then, Sheriff," goes on Scotty, who always scalps the Injun on a penny, "right after the rodeo at the end of the roundup, you can deputize every waddy and put on a big drag for Longloop Simpson!"

"No need, fellers," says a voice behind us. "I plumb aim to have Longloop in my calaboose long before the roundup!"

We all swivel towards the voice. When I see who it is, I get a nasty taste in my mouth. Draped in the doorway is Sheriff Rawson, from over in Buckstrap County. He's a long, lean thorn in our sides.

"If you Sweetgrassers would hire a efficient lawman," Rawson proclaims piously, waving a red flag in the face of my bull-headed pardner, "instead of that fat lard head over there lapping up red-eye, hootowls wouldn't make this county their beddin' grounds!"

"Yuh're crowin' off the wrong roost, Rawson!" Ham snaps. "These ranchers are right satisfied with the way me an Egg are roddin' the law in Sweetgrass." He appeals to the group. "Ain't yuh?"

The "yes" that goes up from the ranchers is just about as enthusiastic as the punch at a prohibition picnic.

"In fact," Ham continues, "these gents is so satisfied with the way we've caught up on our lawin', that they've persuaded me to run the Sweetgrass chuckwagon for the Big Roundup."

"May the fates help their stummicks!" Rawson rolls his eyes skyward. "They'll never be the same again!"

"Them's fightin' words!" Ham bellows.

My pardner lowers his head, starts his arms windmilling, and charges Rawson. Rawson, who is built like a fence rail, dances into the room on his toes, fists cocked. He sidesteps Ham's wild rush and clips him neatly behind the ear. Ham sprawls in the sawdust, skidding along on his corporation like a cake of ice. He scrambles to his feet, whirls, and rushes again.

A self-satisfied smile quirks Rawson's lips. He grandstands a side slip. Ham's flailing fists graze him harmlessly. As my pardner hurtles past, Rawson boots him square in the seat of his pants. The roaring laugh that goes up makes Ham go plumb berserk. He charges again.

This time Rawson is waiting for him. His fists lash out, one, two. Ham's head snaps back. He reels on his heels. Rawson pastes him again. Ham's rubbery legs tangle. He goes down in a heap right beside the chair of a small strange hairpin.

Rawson throws out his chest and commences to crow and strut like a rooster cock. He figures the fight is over. I think so, too, and start over to pick up Ham. But that little slick-hipped fellow has beat me to it. I see the stranger splash his mug of beer in Ham's face, reviving him. Then the chap slyly slips something out of his pocket and presses it in Ham's hand.

Ham looks at it with bleary eyes, shakes his head, and looks at it again. His eyebrows do a cat's back. The little guy nods with a wink. He scrambles around my pardner, gets his hands under Ham's armpits, and heaves him to his feet. Ham advances slowly toward Rawson, reeling as though he's still punch drunk.

"So yuh're comin' back for some more!" Rawson jeers. "I'll oblige yuh by knockin' yuh into the middle of next week!"

HAM comes in wide open, pawing awkwardly with his left fist. His right is trailing low down and way back. Rawson, who towers over Ham, commences to feint, shadow box, and cut all sorts of fancy box-fighting monkeyshines to make Ham look plumb ridiculous. Ham just keeps weaving in like a tired steamroller.

He gets in close, throws an awkward left-hand punch. Rawson clowns his duck, smirking toward the ranchers. The smart Alec shore thinks he's the han'some caper.

Wham!

Ham whips over that trailing right like a tree feller's ax. His knuckles explode on Rawson's jaw with the brittle bone-crushing smack of an ox-knocker's sledge. Rawson jets up into the air, stiff like a sky rocket, sails through space for a dozen feet, and thuds in the sawdust flat on his back. He's out colder than a loan shark's heart.

"Like I said," Ham glowers at the slack-jawed cattlemen, "I can outcook and outfight any danged hairpin in Montaner!"

"How about outsmarting 'em too?" I say under my breath, sidling up to my pardner.

I grip his right wrist on the sly and make him drop what he's got clenched in his fist into my hand. It's a twelve-gauge shotgun shell poured full of lead!

I saunter over to where the little feller who slipped it to Ham is sitting. The eyes in his hard jockey face are sort of anxious. He don't know if I'm sore or not.

"Brass knuckles are against the law in this town," I tell him in a stern voice. "But you ain't so big, and don't pack a equalizer. So I'm returnin' this to yuh."

He catches the twinkle in my eye, pockets the slugger, and says:

"Thanks, Boss. They call me Peewee Smith."

Rawson gets up on his knees, shaking his head like a hoolihanned steer. He fumbles his hat on his head, and gets to his feet, wobbly as a new-born calf. With his lopsided lantern jaw cradled in his hands and his tail between his legs, he staggers for the door, weaving like an Injun with a skinful.

"Now that I've licked yuh," Ham crows, "do yuh still figger yuh can outcook me?"

What Sheriff Rawson replies ain't fit for gentle ears. But there ain't no misunderstanding. He thinks Ham is a stummick robber when it comes to dishing out grub.

Ham gets two beers and takes them over to the table where "Peewee" Smith is still sitting alone. He slides one across the table with a thanks and sits down.

"Don't mention it," the little man says. "Yuh can do something for me. I'm not big enough to hold down a tophand's job. But I'd shore like to be yore chuckwagon flunky for the roundup."

"Yuh're hired!" Ham says magnanimous, not taking time to read carefully the brand marks life puts on a fellow.

I figure the little fellow for a scrapper. He's got a good chin, and he's built right. Like he says, a little light for a tophand. But some of the best ropers I've ever seen have been half-pint California-Spanish vaqueros. Another thing I don't like. He's slick-hipped, but his hand every once in a while strays down to the out seam of his levis. Like a gun-thrower unconsciously checking the set of his walnut. . . .

A week later, the ramrod for the Butte packing house thunders on our door at sunrise. While me and Ham are standing in our underwear rubbing the sleep from

our eyes, his sad news suddenly jars us wide awake.

"Last night someone longlooped the thousand-dollar shorthorn bull the boss was sending to Bill Mivvens!" he says. "You jaspers better rise and shine, or there'll be some new badge toters in this town!"

Me and Ham saddle quick and follow the ramrod out to where he'd made his night camp. He had picketed the hot-blooded bull in a little grassy swale, and made his lonesome camp down by a brook a couple of hundred yards away. There wasn't much sign to read. Some owlhoot had sneaked the bull out of the grass, led him over some rock outcropping to confuse pursuit, and hightailed.

He ain't no nester promoting a little beef. That owlhoot knows his way around! Even though me and Ham once played tag with Geronimo, the scarce sign this chap leaves has us buffaloed. He could learn an Apache a thing or two when it comes to doing the vanishing act. On a badland cattle trail, he gives us the complete slip. We're up a stump!

If it wasn't that Ham was going to cook for the Big Roundup, I know Bill Mivvens would be after our scalps. There's been too danged much longlooping in our country, with some stage holdups throwed in for good measure. Folks has took to looking down their noses at us.

WE KNOW who's doing it. "Longloop" Simpson. Me and Ham ain't laid eyes on the cuss. And even the reward posters from New Mexico, where he stems from, ain't any too certain how he looks. All they can say is that Longloop Simpson is worse than the hoof and mouth disease when it comes to cutting down the size of ranchers' herds. And the Fargo company wants his scalp, a thousand dollars' worth!

Now he's moved in on us. I mog along with my chin on my second shirt button. As soon as the roundup is over, the ranchers will be after me and Ham hot and heavy. They'll want results—or else!

"Egg! Look! Runaway!" Ham yelps, jarring me out of my sulk.

I jerk up. Out of a valley thunders a four-hoss chuckwagon, hurtling along faster than blue blazes. A high plume of dust spreads out far behind like a comet's tail. Across the prairie the wagon careens, bouncing down gullies, slewing around boulders, and jouncing from side to side like a tailless kite. I ain't seen a team drove so since Tom Furlong's wife was having her first kid, and Tom hightailed in for the doctor mucho pronto.

"That wagon's goin' to be smashed to smithereens!" I cry, raking my bronc. "Emergency! Come on!"

Me and Ham take out after the runaway. As we get close, we can hear the canvas top flapping and cracking like a flag in a hurricane. We lay along our broncs' necks, eating gritty dust as we commence to overtake the wildly jouncing wagon. I draw abreast, then forge ahead.

My quirt suddenly hangs in mid-air, drops to my side, and I stay spur. For lashed to the seat of that chuckwagon with a turn of rope is Peewee Smith. He's got the reins in one hand, and with the other is lashing the hosses like Ben Hur coming down the home stretch.

Peewee grins wide, braces his foot on the brake, and commences to saw easy on the reins. He slows the lathered hosses to a walk, then stops.

"Gettin' someone to the doctor?" I yelp, anxious. "Who's hurt?"

"Naw, nothin' like that!" Peewee laughs easy. "I'm in training!"

"For what?" Ham asks.

"Swampin' for you at the roundup!" Peewee says. "When we move camp, we're goin' to get there among the first. I aim to see our boys get the best water and beddin' ground, most of the time. I'm gettin' this team in shape. Take a look at the way I've had the wagon rigged."

Ham slips off his bronc. He circles the chuckwagon, then crawls under it, admiring the extra braces and blacksmithing Peewee had done.

"Son," Ham allows with a smile, "you and me's goin' to make a swell pair!"

But me, I ain't so easy. That star on my vest has got to be satisfied.

"How'd yuh pay for them hosses, the wagon, and all that extra beefin' up?" me, the sheriff, asks.

"Out of my pocket." Peewee waves his hand like money's nothing. "It's an investment!"

That ain't no answer. So I resolve to hang around the roundup, keeping my

eyes peeled. . . .

Well, sir, right after rustling that bull, Longloop must have left our parts. There ain't no more trouble at all. Lawing falls off to nothing. Even the waddies who flock into Sweetgrass for the Big Roundup are mighty well-behaved.

Word's got around that Ham's going to cook for the Sweetgrass bunch. If any hairpin gets rampageous, Ham just wades in, collars him, and gives him a rough shake.

"Listen, feller," Ham admonishes. "Either yuh behave yoreself, or yuh don't eat at my chuckwagon!"

Not a finger is lifted against Ham. He's got the Injun sign on everyone. Why, it'd be a lynching offense to take a poke at my pardner for fear he'd get a busted arm and wouldn't be able to cook for his crew! He's shore treated like a queen bee!

As for Peewee, he spends all his time with his hosses and that beefed-up chuckwagon. He buys grain reckless like a farmer fattening a prize porker for the fair. He feeds the team scientific, and gives them a tough workout every day. Soon he can show a trail of dust to the range-fed saddle broncs.

And can he tool that wagon! That little squirt takes off cross-country, driving reckless as a Fargo driver with a pack of scalp hungry Apaches on his tail. Him and Ham ain't going to be beat in any race for grass or water.

RAWSON gets wind that something is up. He comes snooping around Sweetgrass. But this Peewee is hep to everything. He drives into town as usual with his chuckwagon. But I don't know where he scared up the gosh-awful team he has harnessed to it. There's no glue factory in Sweetgrass. But them sorry, sway-backed, spavined nags he's got hitched to his chuckwagon are shore fugitives from a third-class glue works.

Peewee nurses them up to the Emporium hitchrack, and vanishes. The hammerheads sag like wet dishcloths, all but falling down in the harness. Rawson skulks out from behind the store, and walks around the nags. He's careful to keep far enough away so's if one of the dismal goats suddenly collapses he won't get pinned under it. Then he mounts up and rides out of town. His lanky yellow face has a self-satisfied supercilious grin.

"What'n thunder's the big idear?" Ham wants to know when Peewee comes out of the store.

"That Rawson ain't so dumb!" Peewee observes. "If he spots my fine hosses before the roundup, he'll know something's in the wind. He'll get some good broncs and grain 'em into top condition!"

"But after seein' these jugheads—" Ham grins. "The dumbbell ain't goin' to be so particular about his chuckwagon team." Ham lays a fatherly hand on Peewee's shoulder, continuing, "Yuh might be half-pint sized, Peewee, but yuh shore got a head on them shoulders!"

"I'll go along with you on that, sheriff!" Peewee says, modest as a cock bantam. . . .

The Big Roundup always ends in a grand celebration, rodeo, and county fair here at Sweetgrass. Work starts in the fall 'way up north. The crews pick up all unbranded cattle, sort them out, and haze them back to their respective ranges. It's fun, frolic, and mighty hard and dangerous work. The best waddies in the state show up. Riding the roundup is fine training for our big rodeo. The prizes are attractive, and the bet money is always throwed around considerable.

Ham and Peewee stock their chuckwagon, and drive off to the first meeting place. Because there's no lawing, I tag along. The first camp is in a fine mountain meadow, with lush grass for the broncs, a fine stream, and level dry ground for the boys to bed down on.

That Peewee is shore a tophand swamper. The wagon's hardly stopped rolling before he's scrambled around to the back, let down the door of the rear cabinet for Ham's work table, and layed out his tools. As soon as he's got his hosses picketed, Peewee grabs an ax and whales into a dead pine. Soon he has a big pile of cooking wood split up for Ham.

The boys butcher a maverick. Ham, a clean flour sack tied around his middle, commences to put together a stew. It's a special deal, which, for the sake of being polite, we got to call here a son-of-a-gun stew.

Into his big kettle slung over the fire, Ham puts the brains, sweetbreads, kidneys, heart, and other morsels along with his seasoning and such. Without being

told, Peewee commences to peel spuds and onions.

"What yuh makin' so much for?" I asks, seeing the mountain of spuds Peewee gets ready. "Yuh're cooking for only twenty men."

"Yeah?" Peewee grins sly. "Could be we'll have company!"

I see Rawson, whose chuckwagon is about a hundred yards off, is busy with his Dutch oven. He's flouncing around, basting and tasting to a fare-you-well. When he ain't doing anything, he drapes himself over a wagon wheel, half asleep. Late in the afternoon, I see him stretch, yawn, and after banking his fire, flop in the shade of his wagon for forty winks.

Peewee rummages in the chuckwagon, hauls out his hoss doctoring kit. He takes a jar of salve, says he's got a gall on one of his hosses to attend to, and disappears. When he comes back, he's sort of mussed up and dusty, with the knees of his levis wet with grass stain. The little feller must have had a tussle. But from the way him and Ham slap each other on the back and laugh and guffaw, you'd think they didn't have good sense.

It is just getting dusk when our tired, hungry riders commence to sift in. They climb stiffly off their hip-shot broncs, walk spraddle-legged to the stream, wash, and then hunker around the cookfire, sniffing hungrily. The toothsome savory smells wafting from Ham's softly bubbling pot makes them drool like gaunted wolf pups around a bogged cow.

BECAUSE Rawson's boys are working a little deeper in the hills, they ain't back yet. He strolls over, halting just inside the circle of our firelight.

"If that Sweetgrass stummick robber don't feed yuh enough, boys, come over to the Buckstrap wagon and eat some shore enough cookin'!" he cracks.

"Bah!" Ham snorts, surprising everybody by not getting sore. "Rawson, you just stir yore own swill, an' I'll stir my palate-ticklin' viands. Run along! Mind yore business. Yore face is plumb spoilin' these men's appetites!"

Ham's son-of-a-gun stew shore makes a big hit. The waddies keep passing their plates back to grinning Peewee, until they barely got room for the golden crusted canned peach cobbler Ham dishes out. Stuffed like wolverines, they dump their plates in the wreck pan, build their quirlies, and sit around belching soft and mighty contented.

Peewee grabs the wreck pan, washes the dishes in suds and a hot rinse, just like a careful housewife, and dries them. He just gets through jack-knifing a pile of shaving for the breakfast fire when the hungry Buckstrap crew ride in.

"Rannies, I'm ready for yuh!" we hear Rawson bellow his welcome. "Come and sling yore molars over the grandest grub ever put together on the prairie!"

The starved Buckstrappers don't waste much time washing, but grab their plates and line up eager at the fire. Rawson, faunching around like a Fourth of July master of ceremonies, makes a grand bragging show of dishing up. The waddies squat, load their forks, and shovel it in.

"Sufferin' blisterin' liniment!" one of them yelps, jumping to his feet. "What in the name of tarnation?"

The other buckaroos taste Rawson's food, then angrily spew it out.

"Swill! Poison! Hog food!"

There's a junior sized riot as the hungry hairpins, their tempers touchy, swarm about Rawson, wanting to know what's what. Ham, flanked by Peewee, strolls over to the rumpus.

"Take it easy, boys," Ham placates. "Here, let me taste what that unwashed son of a black pot's tryin' to ruin yore gizzards with."

Ham makes a great exhibition of dipping a spoonful from Rawson's Dutch oven, and taking a tiny taste.

"Gugh!" Ham retches and gags like a schoolboy that's just had a dose of castor oil forced on him. "Tastes like Injun dog cooked with the hair on!" he sputters. "Now, just yuh pore boys step over to my chuckwagon. We got plenty of son-of-a-gun stew left."

"Son-of-a-gun stew! Whoopie!"

The starved waddies leap to their feet faster than spring trout taking the first fly. Ham and Peewee sprint for our wagon, followed by the ravenously hungry Buckstrappers, who fan out behind like the tail of a comet. They cram on Ham's delicious stew, not dumping their plates in the wreck pan until Ham turns the stew kettle upside down to show it's empty.

But I keep my eye on Rawson. He sniffs his pot suspicious, takes a tiny critical taste, smacks his lips puzzled, and spits it out. Hands behind his back, and head bowed in deep thought, he paces up and down in front of his fire. Every once in a while, he takes another puzzled taste. Then I see him suddenly smack his right fist into his left palm. He's recognized the goll-awful taste!

Rawson rigs a candle in a tin can, making a bull's-eye lantern. Like a miser looking for a lost dime, he gets down on his hands and knees to read the sign in ever increasing circles around his fire. About half an hour after the Sweetgrass and Buckstrap boys get their blanket penny ante game going, Rawson shows up in our fringe of firelight.

"Ham," he sings out like a begging Injun, "I got a skinned-up hoss. Yuh got any Dr. Whistle's hoss salve?"

"I—I don't know." Ham commences to sidehill, his eyes getting shifty as a pickpocket's. "I don't guess so."

"Shore we have, Ham!" Peewee speaks up. "I'll get it for him."

Peewee rummages out the hoss doctoring kit, finds the salve, and hands it to Rawson.

"Now, I got you two!" Rawson suddenly shouts, brandishing the jar of salve. "Fellers, I been readin' signs. Our victuals was doctored by that little runt! He put a husky dollop of this hoss salve in my cookin'!"

THE Sweetgrass and Buckstrap men leap to their feet, lining up opposite each other, glaring. All their friendship has evaporated. Grub spoiling, like cache robbing, is one of the unpardonable sins of the frontier. There's a nasty ruckus in the making. Wish I had a pick handle!

"That's a mighty serious charge, Rawson," Peewee states, stepping fearlessly between the line of hostiles.

"I know the smell of that salve!" Rawson blares, shaking his trigger finger at Peewee. "Yuh done it!"

"If I did," Peewee says flatly, "it stands to reason that some of the salve must be gone from that jar. Open it up!"

There's a breathless silence as Rawson kneels by the fire and unscrews the lid of the salve jar. A sigh of relief goes up from the Sweetgrass men. The flickering firelight reveals the untampered factory-smooth surface of the dark salve in the jar.

"Rawson, I'm plumb ashamed of yuh!" Ham scolds, taking the jar from him. "Tryin' to promote a rumpus with a trumped-up charge! Go away! Shame on yuh! Why, yuh ain't fit for human company!"

Rawson, his tail between his legs, crestfallenly drags his boots out of the range of our flickering campfire. He's throwed!

The penny ante game breaks up early. The Buckstrap boys go back to their bedding rolls around the wagon. Peewee and Ham sit on our wagon tongue, drinking their nightcap cup of coffee. I pour myself a cup and stroll over.

"Say, Sheriff"—Peewee grins—"when yuh go back into town, please get me another jar of Dr. Whistle's hoss salve."

"But you got a full jar."

"Looks is deceivin'!" Ham owls.

Peewee holds the jar into the firelight, and with his jacknife skims some off the top. Underneath the thin layer of dark salve is a gray substance.

"I figgered he'd get hep," Peewee relates calmly. "So, after I'd doctored his gravy, I melted out the salve left in the jar, partly filled the jar with tallow, then poured the melted salve back on top, just like new. It shore fooled them Buckstrappers!"

"Say, feller," Ham says in wide eyed admiration, "you and me will shore get along. We're smart!"

Something in the way Peewee says, "Yeah!" makes me turn around and run my eye over the wise runt again.

When it comes time to move camp, the chuckwagons light out hell for leather to be the first to the new rendezvous in order to get the choice camp site. Soon we're out in front, with Rawson jamming the breeze right behind. Peewee is tooling his four hosses like a veteran stage driver.

Then, like a crooked jockey, Peewee commences to drive sloppy, making errors in judgment, and letting his finely grained hosses loaf on him. With a crack of his whip, and a wild derisive challenge, Rawson thunders past Peewee, who never regains the lead. Rawson hogs the best camp site, and we again set up near him.

"The boys will be sleeping with their

toes downhill because yuh lost the race, Peewee," I admonish. "Why did yuh hold back and let Rawson beat yuh?"

"Heck, Sheriff, if I'd win right off he'd loose his dander." Peewee shrugs. "I aim to keep that onery jasper plumb competitive!"

That's what happens. From then on, through the whole darned roundup, Rawson and Peewee seesaw back and forth in the races for the best camp sites. Ham takes to riding with Peewee, working the whip like a stagecoach lasher, and Rawson's flunky does the same.

Waddies will bet on anything. Soon the whole roundup crew and all the reps are betting on the chuckwagon races between Sweetgrass and Buckstrap. But the boys haven't drawn their wages, so the bets are in the jack-knife against a couple of plugs of eating tobacco class. That's why I don't feel too badly when Peewee and Ham deliberately throw a race now and then.

The race to the last camp site ends in a dead heat, with Peewee and Rawson slewing to a stop at exactly the same time. Only I know that except for the last half mile, Peewee didn't let out his fine team.

"I'd have won if yuh hadn't crowded me!" Rawson bellows, jumping from his wagon and making a run for Peewee.

Peewee ducks behind Ham's bulk, like a small kid taking refuge behind his big brother. Rawson, who's brandishing a fire iron, loses his temper, and makes a swipe at Peewee. Ham twists the iron out of Rawson's hand, and slugs. Rawson ducks under the blow, closes in. The two of them fall to the ground, threshing, kicking, gouging, and committing assorted and sundry mayhem on each other like a couple of river cats.

I NOTICE Peewee run to a thicket, slyly grab something in his gloved hand, and return to the fight with the speed of an antelope. Like a referee, he follows the rolling, grunting pair. Getting down on his hands and knees, he whispers something to Ham, and drops a bunch of leaves on the ground. Before anyone notices, Ham gives a mighty grunt, heaves Rawson tail for teakettle, and grinds his face in them leaves.

All of a sudden, Rawson commences to kick, thresh, and bellow bloody murder like an explorer being boiled in a cannibal's pot. He shakes loose, leaps to his feet, and hightails to the creek like a scared jack-rabbit. Rawson dives in with a great splash, and commences to slop water on his face, which is glowing red like a house afire.

As the assembled waddies hoot their enjoyment, I keep my eye on Peewee. He's taken off his sombrero, dropped it on the leaves, and is sitting down beside it, laughing fit to kill. I casually sit on the other side of his hat, lift it like a waddy peeking into a cook's kettle, and put it back again quick. Nettles!

"Thanks, Peewee!" Ham grins, seeing I'm wise. "That shore is comin' to a feller's rescue. We can outsmart Rawson any old day of the week! Can't we?"

"You bet *we* can!"

I glance up at Peewee again. He put a trifle too much emphasis and a nasty little touch of sarcasm in that "we." Could be that little squirt is too smart for his britches!

"That was an exciting chuckwagon race!" Banker Williams, who is visiting our last roundup camp, says. "As chairman of the Sweetgrass Rodeo, I think it would be a good idea to put on a chuckwagon race between you two!"

"I got five hundred bucks that says I can outdrive that little pup any day of the week!" Rawson bellows.

"I'll just cover that!" Ham speaks right up. "Put yore *dinero* where yore mouth is!"

"Who'll hold the stakes?" Rawson commences to crawfish.

"Banker Williams," Ham dictates. "If I know these buckaroos, a heap of cash is goin' to be wagered on this chuckwagon race. Banker William's vault is the only safe place for the stakes!"

Back in Sweetgrass again, Peewee tends to his hosses as though they were entered in a million-dollar sweepstakes. There ain't that much money being bet, but Banker William's vault is soon crammed full of sealed envelopes of bet cash. The odds, which started out even have changed to ten to eight in favor of Ham and Peewee. But that don't mean there's any scarcity of Buckstrap money. It keeps pouring in from all over the state. The chuckwagon race is crowding all the other rodeo events into the background.

"Egg," Banker Williams says to me, "I'm getting a little worried. I've got over thirty thousand dollars of bet money in that vault of mine!"

"No owlhoots operatin' in these parts now," I state flatly. "Longloop Simpson and his gang must of pulled their freight."

The day before the race, Peewee takes his beefed-up chuckwagon down to the creek, jacks up the wheels, and puts them to soak to swell the wood tight against the rims. He carefully wipes off the old axle grease, and greases up lavish with fresh grease.

I sleep fitful the night before the celebration. I don't know if it's something I et, or if I'm worried about all that *dinero* in Banker William's vault. Ham must be worried, too. I hear the springs of his bunk groan restless. I'm about to speak to him when, by the moonlight coming in the window, I see him do something that clamps my tongue.

Ham's taking the stool from beside his bunk and stuffing it under the covers to make it look as though he's still under the blankets! He takes his clothes, and tiptoes silent out of the room. I'm right behind him. Skulduggery!

On the porch, Ham puts on his duds, picks up our kerosene can, and lopes off in the direction of the barn. My heart is in my throat. Is my pardner walking in his sleep? What's the coal-oil for? Has he suddenly gone arson locoed? Fellers have had their brains warped into becoming firebugs!

It humps me to Injun after him. First, Ham makes sure Peewee is sound asleep near his fine team in the barn. Ham then skulks around to the beefed-up chuckwagon parked outside. He rummages around, finds the wheel jack, and raises up one of the rear wheels. He takes off the nut, and pulls the wheel.

CAREFULLY, with the coal-oil and a rag, Ham washes every bit of grease from the axle and wheel, and puts it back on. He does the same with the other rear wheel. After he's finished, Ham daubs a little axle grease around the outside of the nuts so's Peewee won't suspicion anything.

I sneak back to bed, trembling all over like a Pike County hairpin with the ague. My heart is rock-heavy. What's Ham up to? As if I didn't know the answer. The commercial-minded rat!

It's them ten to eight odds. Ham's bet on Buckstrap! He aims to throw the race and make a killing! The doublecrossing baboon!

Ham sneaks back, flops into bed, and soon is snoring peaceful as a dove. That lummox shore ain't got no conscience! I don't know what to do. Should I go out and re-grease them axles? Or should I lay low? I get to thinking about that pardner of mine. He's done some mighty queer things in the past. Perhaps he's got a hen on the nest.

Well, Ham's as cheerful as a bridegroom the next morning. He don't seem worried. My mind's made up. I'm going to string along, and let the knothead play out his hand. Them dry axles will heat up and commence to squeal after about five miles of running. I'll be right there!

About ten, Peewee drifts in. He's grinning from ear to ear, and happy as a lark. The committee has just announced the course of the chuckwagon race. They are to start at the grandstand, take the Shelby road for six miles, then cut across country around Table Hill, and back to the grandstand across the open prairie. Peewee's sure he's got the race in the bag. His beefed-up wagon will be able to rack across country and over the open prairie at a blistering pace that'll smash Rawson's rig to splinters.

"My hosses are on edge, and fit as fiddles!" Peewee exclaims joyfully. "Ham, I'm goin' to hitch up about a hour before the race and walk 'em around slow. I'll pick you up at the grandstand about two minutes before the gun so's the crowd won't spook my broncs."

"Fine!" Ham grins, looking up from plaiting a new popper on his buckskin lash. "Don't be late."

Now, folks, I ain't going to tell you about the fine rodeo we put on. Because, like everyone else, you're just waiting around for the chuckwagon race. Half an hour before starting time, I notice Banker Williams has joined the crowd.

"Ain't yuh afraid to leave the bank with all that bet money in yore vault?" I ask.

"Oh, it's all right." Williams waves his hand. "I left my clerk, Hutchenson, in

charge with his bird gun across his knees. There's no danger. You, yourself, assured me that Longloop had evaporated from these parts!"

Rawson, with his broncs all dolled up with colored ribbons braided in their manes and curried until they shine like glass, sweeps through the gate. He takes a turn around the track amid the deafening din of his supporters. He bows and scrapes to the applauding crowd, all but throwing kisses like a prima donner.

"Where's the Sweetgrass nags?" he questions in a loud voice, pulling out his watch. "This race is to start at three o'clock sharp. If Sweetgrass don't show up in five minutes, I'm claimin' the race by default!"

Where is Peewee?

The grandstand dies down to a breathless tense hush. The minutes tick off. No sign of our Sweetgrass rig.

Ham commences to chew his mustache. My stomach does flip-flops as the impatient judges haul out their watches. They commence to put their heads together. After all our work, are we going to lose the race by default?

I catch Ham's eye and jerk my head toward our broncs. We'd better get ready to slope. Sweetgrass will be no place for us. Them bet losers will tear us limb from limb.

We're just sidling toward our broncs, when a great shout goes up from the gate. It swings wide. In prances Peewee's team at a lively clip.

Wise feller! He's got his team all warmed up and eager to run. Rawson's broncs have cooled off waiting. The starter's pistol bangs. Ham pops his lash like a bullwhacker. Peewee's willing team jumps into the lead. They're off in a cloud of dust.

I sprint for my bronc, rake it unmerciful, taking a shortcut. I get out on the road ahead of the race. Behind me are two great clouds of dust. I keep up the breakneck pace until I'm about where I expect Peewee's dry axles to commence to squeal. I hide my hoss, and hunker behind a rock.

Sure enough, Ham and Peewee have a long lead. Rawson is eating their dust. They come down toward me at express train speed. Suddenly them dry rear axles commence to screech like a pig with its tail in a crack! Peewee reins his lathered team to a halt. He and Ham jump off, running around to the rear of the wagon.

HAM, who must be looking for lard, jerks open the door of the cook's cabinet at the rear of the chuckwagon. He whirls suddenly, his hand streaking for his six-gun.

Too late! Peewee swings one from his boot top. His fist crashes into Ham's jaw. Ham falls on his face like he's been blackjacked. I remember the lead-loaded shotgun shell slugger the runt packs.

Peewee just gets Ham rolled into the ditch out of sight when Rawson thunders past him like a blue streak. I'm just about to show myself and brace the little squirt when Peewee jerks Ham's gun from its holster. He lets go three loads in the air.

An answering shot booms from the deep gully up the road a piece. Three hidden riders charge out and race for the stranded chuckwagon. They mill for a moment. Peewee hands each two stuffed gunny-sacks from the cabinet. That's fishy!

I Injun quick down to them, crawl up to a rock twenty feet away.

Laying my cutter across the top of my fort, I bark:

"Reach!"

One of the fellers goes for his gun. I part his hair with a slug. I make them all, including yammering Peewee, spread-eagle on the road. Keeping my gun on them, I spatter Ham with some water from the canvas bag.

He sits up, rubs his jaw rueful. Then, like he's been stung by a bee, he leaps to his feet.

"Come on!" he yelps. "We're in a race! Egg, throw them gunny-sacks back in the cabinet while I hogtie and handcuff these gents!"

They all commence to run off the mouth at once. But we ain't got time to pay them no mind. I've even got to threaten Peewee with a gun hump to make him shut up. In no time we've got the four heaved like cordwood into the wagon box.

"Hold on!" I cry, "we can't win no race with dry axles! Ham, I saw you fix 'em! What's the deal?"

"No time for palaverin'!" Ham snorts. "What I fix, I can unfix!"

With that, my pardner rummages in the wagon. He hauls out a big oil can, and squirts lubricating oil into the axles. I don't know all the answers. But Ham's a foxy customer. Judging by Rawson's dust he has pulled up some, thinking we're busted down.

Ham grabs the reins. I pop the lash like a rifle fire at an Injun ambush. Rawson's only a mile ahead of us! And boy, are we jamming the breeze on his tail!

The route swings off the road toward Table Hill. Ham's pushing on the reins. The taste of Rawson's dust gets grittier. We're gaining! Around Table Hill, we're on the old mining road. Then, lickity-split and hell for leather, we enter the worst stretch. The open prairie.

Our chuckwagon bounces, hurtles from side to side like a runaway freight train. Steadily we're pulling up on Rawson. Our lead hosses are right behind his flapping canvas. Ham pulls to one side to pass. Inch by inch, we're gaining.

Our lead team is opposite Rawson. He suddenly grabs the whip out of his lasher's hand. Reaching far out, he lashes our team about the head.

"Dirty pool!" Ham blares.

Our spooked hosses fight the reins. The wagon slews wildly, tipping up on two wheels. We hang for a breathless instant, then I throw my weight way over and the wagon settles back. The wheels come down with a jarring thud.

Ham's mouth is stretched in a taut, onery line. He ain't one to see a man abuse a hoss for personal advantage. Rawson has plumb placed himself outside of any decent consideration.

Ham gets his broncs running smooth, then edges alongside of Rawson, keeping well beyond the reach of his lash.

"I want a sprint!" Ham yells in my ear. "But easy with yore whip!"

I just flick them willing hosses. Peewee's grain and fine conditioning pay off. They surge ahead. Then we're about a length out in front, Ham pulls hard on the inside rein. The team wheels sharply. We're broadside, right in front of Rawson. He's got to jam on his brake, or crash.

We hear the rasp of his brake, and the grind of his front wheels against the

[*Turn page*]

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wagon bed as he swerves. Ham straightens out his team. We're off again like a five-alarm fire!

I glance back. Rawson's team is all fouled up, bucking and pulling every which way. We've gained two city blocks before he gets lined out and comes tearing after us.

"Fine work!"

I GLANCE into the wagon box. Handcuffed Peewee has hunched himself up so he can look over the back of the cabinet. His wizened jockey face is electric with the excitement of the race. He keeps firing comments on our progress to the other three prisoners.

We keep our lead. Ham cuts straight for Sweetgrass, bumping down into dry washes, careening along the sides of gullies, and splashing through creeks with a great shower of spray. Rawson hangs on to our tail like grim death. With our beefed-up wagon, we can bull through the bad stretches straight ahead. Rawson has to detour around to keep from smashing his rig.

But we've got the weight of the four prisoners. This poundage commences to tell on our hosses. As Sweetgrass looms up ahead, the tired team is commencing to run on their nerve.

But we're out in front. I carefully estimate the distance and the speed with which Rawson is creeping up on us. We'll make it. But she's going to be a neck and neck finish.

Then I hear it! My heart leaps into my throat, buck-jumping. We're sunk!

From behind, there's the first thin protesting wail of an axle commencing to run dry! Lubricating oil just hasn't got the staying power of axle grease. It's worn off. Our axles are running hot. If we stop to oil up, Rawson will sweep past, winning hands down. If we try to bull it through, our tired team will lose their lead.

I hear a commotion. Them prisoners. Has one got loose? I jerk my gun, and throw my head around. What I see just about blows my hat off my head.

Two of the handcuffed prisoners have grabbed Peewee by the belt and are holding him out over the wagon box. His head ain't six inches from the grinding steel rim of the rear wheel. But he's urging the men to shove him closer.

For in Peewee's manacled hands is our oil can! He's squirting lubricant on the inside of the smoking axle! It carries into the wheel hub. The squealing stops. Our prisoners haul Peewee back, then shove him out on the other side to oil that wheel!

Down the main street of Sweetgrass we thunder. But something's wrong. Instead of being at the grandstand where our race is to end, the folks are lining the street. They're excited. But I think it's their eagerness over the race.

Rawson is crowding us. He makes a supreme bid to pass. We meet the challenge, our lathered team breaking into a fire hoss gallop. We thunder through the gates, around the track once, and come to a halt in front of the grandstand.

The winners!

But are we? There's no wild applause. No cheering. Just stony grim silence. Something has soured!

Bleak-eyed Banker Williams and a wooden-faced committee tromp purposefully up to me and Ham.

"Egg," Banker Williams clips, "who'n thunderation told you to sashay off on this race, leaving Sweetgrass without law protection?"

"Why?" I want to know, a gap wind howling up my spine. "What's happened?"

"An hour after you left town, Longloop Simpson and five of his men racked into town. They blew open my vault! Made off with every cent of the bet money!"

"But your clerk?" I commence. "You left him shotgun-guarding the bank."

"He's disappeared!"

"Don't take it so hard, men!" Peewee laughs right in our doleful faces. "The clerk is all right. All of yore bet money is safe in the cabinet of our chuckwagon! Here, unlock my 'cuffs. I'll get it for yuh."

"I'll unlock them cuffs in a pig's eye!" I snarl. "You and yore owlhoots just beat Longloop to our *dinero!* Yuh little crook!"

"Yeah?" Peewee grins infuriating. "Listen, Sheriff, I just did yuh an official favor! I knew Longloop was plannin' to lift the bet money. Me and my boys knew it would be a heap safer in our chuckwagon. So we had the clerk open the safe and transferred the money. Officially!"

"Who are you to talk officially?" I snort.

"Reach into my vest pocket and see!" Peewee smiles.

I take the folded paper from the inside of his vest pocket. Ham peeks over my shoulder. It's a letter from the Governor of Montaner to us!

"I—I'll be cow kicked!" Ham gapes. "This runt—I mean gent—is Captain Rowe, of the New Mexican Rangers!"

"Yep!" Captain Rowe enjoys Ham's fluster. "Get these cuffs off. We're havin' company!"

HAM just gets the cuffs off when Rawson pushes through the crowd.

"What's this I hear about this little squirt being part of Longloop's gang?" he bellows, mad clean through about losing the race, and anxious to take his spleenishness out on somebody. "Has he confessed yet?"

"Nope," Ham commences. "He—"

"Well, I'll dang soon slap it out of him!" Rawson roars.

He raises his right hand to give Peewee a back-handed cuff across the face.

Wham!

Captain Rowe's fist, with his lead-loaded slugger in it, connects flush with Rawson's chin. He measures his length on the greensward, as the writer fellers say. Captain Peewee walks over to Rawson, calmly sits on his chest, and commences to wipe the oil and dirt from his face.

"This yahoo'll take a little sittin' on!" he observes dryly. "Take a look up there!"

Out of the hills on the other side of town a long file of horsemen wind. Five men, their hands tied to their saddle-horns ride in the middle.

"My Rangers have rounded up Longloop and his gang for yuh," Captain Rowe says, getting up off Rawson's chest. "By gosh, Ham, it's just as we planned it, eh?"

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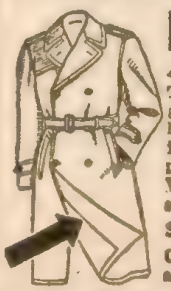

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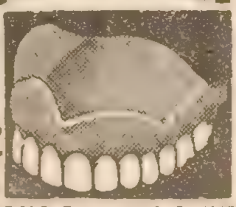

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"Hump!" Ham grunts, then catches Peewee's sly wink. "Yep, folks," Ham goes on, throwing out his chest. "Me and Captain Peewee, here, planned it just like she worked out!"

Captain Peewee Rowe grabs Rawson by a handful of vest and jerks him to his feet.

"I'd shore like to have caught you washin' the axle grease out of my rear wheels!" he grits.

"Me, too!" Ham lies barefaced. "I'd shore have climbed his frame, I would!"

I just button my lip tight. Ham's the only hairpin I know who can cook his own goose with a feller, and then serve it at a banquet in his honor!

THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 7)

swimming pools, with brush-roofed pavilions.

Those things were tokens of their acceptance. And so the days, shortened by toil, were also sweetened by simple pleasure. The Indians, at first surprised by the sudden invasion of their ancestral homeland, also accepted the inevitable, but remained aloof and apart from the swarming newcomer.

All sense of dimension is soon lost on the desert. Even time is forgotten in the immense magnitude of land and sky. The suspenseful year of 1942 passed. Came '43 and '44 and a hopeful upturn in the far theaters of the war, but even those events seemed vague, like mirages, out on the desert where all human endeavor seems insignificant.

Then, with the mightiest smash of man-made destruction since creation, came Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the collapse of the enemy.

Relocation in Reverse

With the war's end, the machinery of "relocation" went into reverse. The 18,000 Japanese again were evacuated. By now, some felt a melancholy sort of attachment to the vast, empty land that had swallowed them, now disgorged them. But they bundled their belongings. They trickled away from Poston until not a one of them remained.

The barracks stood silent, the streets deserted, once-crowded places echoed empti-

ness. The mesquite marched back into the gardens, the gray spider wove his webs in vacant doorways, and coyotes howled in the starlight.

Poston was a ghost town, deserted and all but forgotten. The quaint little pagodas warped and weathered. Fish leaping in the swimming pools. Tomorrow became yesterday. Events of new importance crowded out war memories. The eternal wind plucked at tatters of roofing paper peeling from the squat, ugly barracks.

A Strange Destiny

But the destiny of Poston was not finished. The ghost town wasn't dead, only dormant, like desert growth in long, hot summer. The forces of peace were forging scattered links of circumstance into a chain of events-to-be.

One of these events shaped a human destiny, strangely woven into the fate of Mojaveland, like a symbol in an Indian rug.

On the slow loom of time, before the war years, a young agricultural extension agent worked on the Papago Reservation in southern Arizona. In 1938 he was ordered to work out a settlement plan, as projected in the long ago by Colonel Poston for the Reservation of the Mojaves. Those lands, fringing the Colorado, long had had water rights. But very little had been put to beneficial use. Unless the established flow was diverted from the river, onto the Indian lands, those rights ultimately would lapse and be lost.

Huge Irrigation System

So a huge irrigation system was planned, one that would bring under cultivation the heart of the rich but almost wholly undeveloped desert plain.

Like other "paper projects" of that period, the reclamation and settlement plan was pigeonholed. War loomed, bringing demands for more urgent needs.

And so it went, until that fateful December 7. Soon afterwards, wires from Washington crackled with an order for the extension agent to proceed immediately to the Poston relocation center.

This was the first that the extension agent, Ralph M. Gelvin, had ever laid eyes on the land of the Mojaves. For four months, at the start, he lived in one of the cheerless bar-

[Turn page]

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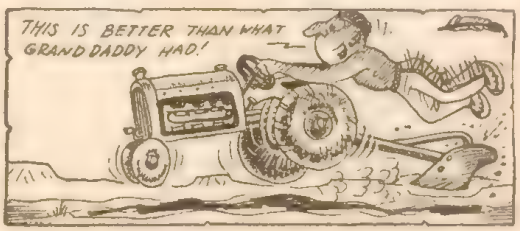
racks, although he had been appointed Associate Project Director. He stayed to finish the job, and to depart when Poston became a "ghost town."

But the end of that job proved to be only the start of another. A few weeks ago, Gelvin was ordered back—this time as Superintendent of the quarter-million-acre Colorado River Reservation of the Mojaves. Much of the work he had done, back in 1938, had become the guiding pattern for transforming the mesquite wilderness into a production area that will, among other things, have a powerful impact on the agriculture economy of the Southwest.

Indian Rehabilitation

It will, and already is accomplishing, something a whole lot bigger. Our story, from here on out, becomes a story of Indian rehabilitation that will wipe out some of the shame for the nation's past neglect and mistreatment of Western Indians.

Dust rises high in the air these days, in Mojaveland, across the river from my campground. Machines bigger than war tanks are



clearing, levelling, ditching, wetting and planting 100,000 acres of the reservation.

Now what will something like 1000 Mojaves do with 100,000 acres of producing land? Well folks, about the same thing is happening there as happened when this nation of ours became haven for people the world over. Indians of all recognized tribes can come and settle in Mojaveland. Each family is allotted 40 acres planted to alfalfa and loaned an average of $5000 to buy implements, livestock, and housing. Some Hopis, among the first to come, have already paid back their 5-year loans in two or three years.

For the rich, river-watered lands produce hugely of cotton, alfalfa and other crops. Cattle fatten and thrive. Land and climate are much the same as fabulous Imperial Valley, that ships trainloads of melons, lettuce and other produce.

Indians are arriving at the Agency at Parker faster than they can be put on their allotments. Plantings and settlement follow the dust of the giant graders. From everywhere the Indians come. Apaches, Chemehuevis, Hopis, Hualpais, Navajos.

After a year on the land, they can join the Mojave tribe, which rules its own affairs through an elected Tribal Council, which sits in strict parliamentary fashion, like any board of aldermen.

A Land Rush

It is a land rush, and more. I size it up as the most important thing that has happened to Mr. & Mrs. Original American since the opening of Indian Territory. Above and beyond all that, here in the mesquite wilderness of western Arizona, a United Nations of Indians is being "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

With a good living will come a good life. Already, little Indians are tackling education in schools built for young Japanese. And the Poston barracks are being patched up and lived in again. They've come mighty handy as temporary housing, until newcomers can build homes.

I came along a Poston street where Navajo youngsters played in the sun, while over at a community wash-and-bath place, their elders rejoiced in suds and scrubbing.

"They can hardly believe it's all true," smiled Superintendent Gelvin. "They never saw so much water before in their lives."

Some of the barracks are being torn down by Indians who buy them from the government, and use lumber, fixtures and wiring to put into their homes on the new land.

Wiring? That's right, hombres and hombresses. A power line brings cheap electricity from the life-giving Colorado. So what do the wimmenfolks want—and get? Electric ranges and washers! And why not? Doesn't the big chief himself ride around nowadays on a snorting new tractor?

Game for Sport

It's the beginning of a heap of big things, for the reservation ultimately will have land and opportunity for 100,000 Indians, Superintendent Gelvin says. But it's the end of bow-and-arrow days, and "wild Injuns."

[*Turn page*]

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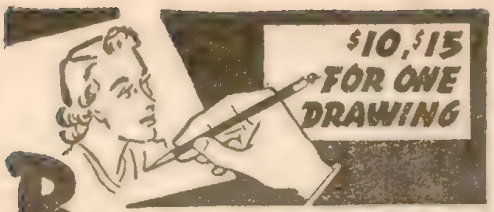

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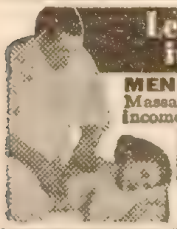

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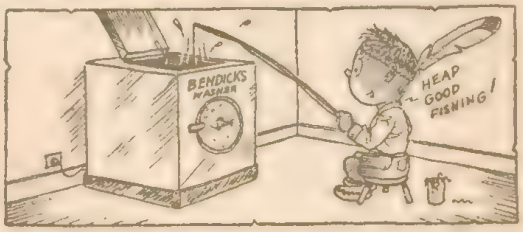

are not. It concerns ancient beliefs. But nobody argues about old beliefs.

I doubt it even if the Navajos brought along their "chindees," or evil spooks, which are numerous and everywhere, according to native Navajo superstition.

After all, why import spooks to a "ghost town"? Anyhow, folks, I wish you could see, as I do, the hope and enthusiasm in Mojaveland. I wish I could tell you what some Indians say about it. More room for that, I reckon, in our coming get-togethers in this Home Corral.

—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

TO YOU lovers of the West as it was and is, we practically guarantee that the next issue of *Popular Western* will be just as thrilling, colorful and full of suspense as any reader could wish. Novelets or short stories, they all carry the action-packed, fast-moving theme of adventure in the vastness of nature that makes up the backdrop of our American West. Hard-bitten gunslingers, sheriffs and marshals, rannies and their horses—all of these are woven into the pattern of fiction and fact *Popular Western* Magazine gives you.

What might be a cowboy's most valuable possession? His saddle, maybe? Well, we sort of think it's his horse. And that's what L. P. Holmes thinks, too, for in our featured novelet in the next issue Mr. Holmes gives you a story of a ranny and his horse that's tops. BLAZE FACE is the title of the story and it's also the horse's name. Blaze Face is not any common range horse. In his red-coppery body he has more fire, and love, than any horse Curt Powell had ever seen.

He was a man's horse, and it took a man to ride him. A one-man piece of horse flesh, and Powell was that man. And, strangely,

Blaze Face learned to love that one man before he grew to hate all other men.

Maybe a horse can think a bit. Be as it may, Blaze Face had a reason for not wanting anyone else to ride him. Many tried—including Sig Loftus, egotistic wrangler who figgered the horse wasn't born he couldn't break. Sig had to learn the hard way that Blaze Face wasn't for him, and in his rage when he knew he couldn't master the mighty red stallion, he went for his gun. And that's when Curt Powell stepped in. Here's a bit of what happened when these two rannies clashed over the mighty lord of the corral:

Supremely and overbearingly confident of his ability to ride any horse that ever walked, there was no subtley in Sig Loftus' method of going about breaking a horse to saddle. He merely rode them and rode them till they quit. If he broke their spirit in the meantime, that was all right with him. In fact, he seemed to prefer that sort of ending, for it inflated his sense of mastery, upped his ego. It was this method he had in mind the morning he set out to break Blaze Face.

Loftus was startled when Curt Powell said gravely, "You're walkin' into something, Loftus. Your usual methods ain't going to work with this horse. That's no ordinary bangtail out there. That horse will fight you to the death—you'll never break him trying to rough it out with him. The horse is intelligent—I never saw a finer-looking head on an animal. Why don't you take it easy, gain the bronc's confidence and work up to the riding part of the deal gradually?"

To which Loftus laughed sneeringly, "Who's top twister in this outfit, Powell—you or me? I've unrolled the kinks out of more tough ones than you'll ever see! I smooth 'em down for guys like you to ride! You go play patty-cake with some old bangtail that hasn't got a buck jump in its system. Leave the tough ones to me!"

They had to rope Blaze Face first, throw him and blindfold him. Sig Loftus' temper, always black and easily stirred, was up and raging now. He was out to master this horse—or kill it. The saddle was in place, the cinch set, the blindfold across the horse's face. Loftus went into the saddle, his dark face harsh and forbidding. As he jerked off the blindfold, he set his spurs savagely.

No man among the watchers had ever seen a horse go so high in one terrific, twisting leap. That leap ended in a snap that like to tore Sig Loftus' head off. When horse and rider came down, Loftus had lost a stirrup. Blaze Face whirled, cat-fast, and went up into another explosive leap that literally blew Sig Loftus out of the saddle . . .

Then he went at Blaze Face with a lurching run. It was incredible that Loftus should have done what he did. Blaze Face had quit trying to buck the saddle off, was swinging back and forth

[*Turn page*]

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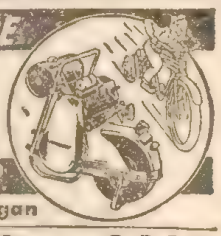

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along the far side of the corral. Now, seeing Loftus coming at him, it was the instinct of the wild that caused Blaze Face to try and evade. He raced alongside the fence.

But Loftus was coming in at an angle, pinching him off, and at the last second Loftus leaped, grabbing at the saddlehorn. He caught it, hung on, with Blaze Face dragging him. Loftus pulled himself up and ahead, managed to strike his feet and leap, and the forward pull brought him into the saddle again.

It was a superb exhibition of horsemanship, but it was blind, wild, reckless rage also—and the worst of judgment. For Blaze Face met the challenge with another of those towering, explosive leaps before Loftus could even find his stirrups. This time he threw Loftus completely over the corral fence.

Loftus came up staggering, running for the bunkhouse. "He's gone loco!" exclaimed Andy Gregg. "He's goin' for a gun—the crazy, black-tempered fool!"

Curt Powell dropped into the corral, raced across it, vaulted the far fence, sped after Loftus. . . . Loftus gained the bunkhouse and was coming out of it, a six-shooter in his hand. The man was plainly beside himself. Trampled ego, fury over being thwarted in conquest, and just plain ingrown meanness had sent Sig Loftus berserk, with only one thought in his temper-blackened mind, which was to destroy the thing that had successfully resisted him, this horse that had tossed him as easily as an ordinary bucker might have piled the rawest beginner. The man's ego had been tremendous; he couldn't stand to see it deflated.

Curt Powell stepped in front of him. "Drop that gun, Loftus! You'll not use it on Blaze Face. The horse whipped you, fair and square. Be man enough to admit it! You've nothing to be ashamed of—the horse is tremendous! Drop that gun!"

In the inevitable fight that followed, not with guns but with fists, Powell came to two resolutions—that he must best Loftus, and more: that the magnificent Blaze Face must be his and his alone. How he got the big red, how he lost him and then regained him again, L. P. Holmes will tell you in BLAZE FACE in the next issue. Look forward to this epic of a man and his horse!

Our old friends from Painted Post are back again in the next issue of this magazine. Tom Gunn comes through with another of his action-jammed novelets—REST FOR THE WICKED—in which Sheriff Blue Steele and his *segundo*, Shorty Watts, uncover a case of the oldest law of the desert: the "Water Code." That's when a man deliberately keeps water from another dying of thirst.

And in this case, Sheriff Steele discovers a .30-30 bullet hole in a canteen at a dry water hole did the murderous trick.

How the sheriff and his little deputy—who

incidentally is getting ...ter at crime-solving all the time—turn the table on this killer and expose his hand, makes one of the best Painted Post stories to date!

To men with a total of twenty-four thousand dollars in reward money hanging over their heads, every stranger is a potential enemy. But when these three "Robin Hoods" of the West—"Deacon" Ross, "Pud" Eiler and "Buck" Fleming—overhear a plot in which a pretty girl is to get the worst of it, Buck Fleming has the answer.

"Any man," he muttered, "who will play on a man's love for a woman to get him to go wrong, is second cousin to a skunk!"

Skunk or not, author Bruce Douglas has the answer to that in his tale of Sweetwater Valley, WANTED MEN MOVE FAST.

These novelets, plus many short stories and articles, make up the next issue of *Popular Western* magazine. You pays your money and you takes your choice—but here there is no choice: all the stories and features are the best that we can give you of Western fiction and fact!

OUR LETTER BOX

FOLKS, we can take it. What we'd like to see is so many letters coming into this office from readers of this magazine, that we'd be practically snowed under. Well, maybe not that many. But we sure do like to hear from you readers, long and often. After all, it's what you like and dislike that we take into consideration when we read stories and articles submitted to us. This is your magazine; write and tell us what you think of it.

Here are some of the letters that have come in to Our Letter Box recently:

Being a constant reader of POPULAR WESTERN, especially of Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, a recent story of the 6th United States Cavalry commanded by Colonel E. E. Carr, was very interesting to me, having been a sergeant in "F" Troop, 6th United States Cavalry, under Colonel Carr in New Mexico and Arizona and in the Sioux war in North and South Dakota in 1890-91.

A man whose name was Nicholson was in the Troop. The stories of this writer are so true to life in the Army at that time, that I wonder if he could be the same man. Could be. I am only eighty past.—*John A. Woods, Berryville, Arkansas.*

Many thanks for your kind letter, Mr.

[*Turn page*]

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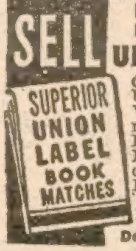

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I think I like POPULAR WESTERN about the best of all Western magazines because it gives me all the fiction I want, yet at the same time the fact articles are interesting, too. I've learned a lot about the West from reading The Home Corral by Doc Long Trail—things I never knew before. These articles help me enjoy the fiction all the more, because I then have a better background of the West and can appreciate them. It's pretty hard to say just what my favorite stories are, but Sheriff Blue Steele sure gets himself in some jams and then gets out again in a smart way. I get a good laugh out of his *segundo*, Shorty Watts. The way those two lawmen work together in solving the crimes around Painted Post make good reading. Let's have more stories of their actions.—*Louis Langdon, Rochester, New York.*

Truthfully, Louis, even a hardened old editor can get a kick out of editing a Painted Post story. Every time we pick up one of Tom Gunn's manuscripts dealing with these two smart lawmen, we sit back for an enjoyable reading session. We're glad you like the magazine. Write to us any time you feel in the mood; we like to hear from all of our readers.

Some of us Westerners can get a bit critical at times when we read Western magazines. Because we live in this vast country, we're a bit particular to make certain stories with a Western background sound authentic. So I'd like to go on record as saying your stories in POPULAR WESTERN are okay. They hold the flavor of the old West, and the background seems real. Please, now, no errors of fact when using historical background in your stories. We don't want to have to pick flaws in your good magazine.—*Joe Belder, El Paso, Texas.*

Be assured, Joe, we do our best—and will continue to do our best—to keep our stories as true to the old West as possible. We're glad to know that readers like you living in the West approve of the efforts of our authors.

Well, that's about all this time, folks. The more mail you send us, the better we like it. Just drop a letter or postcard to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody, and *adios.*

—THE EDITOR.

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